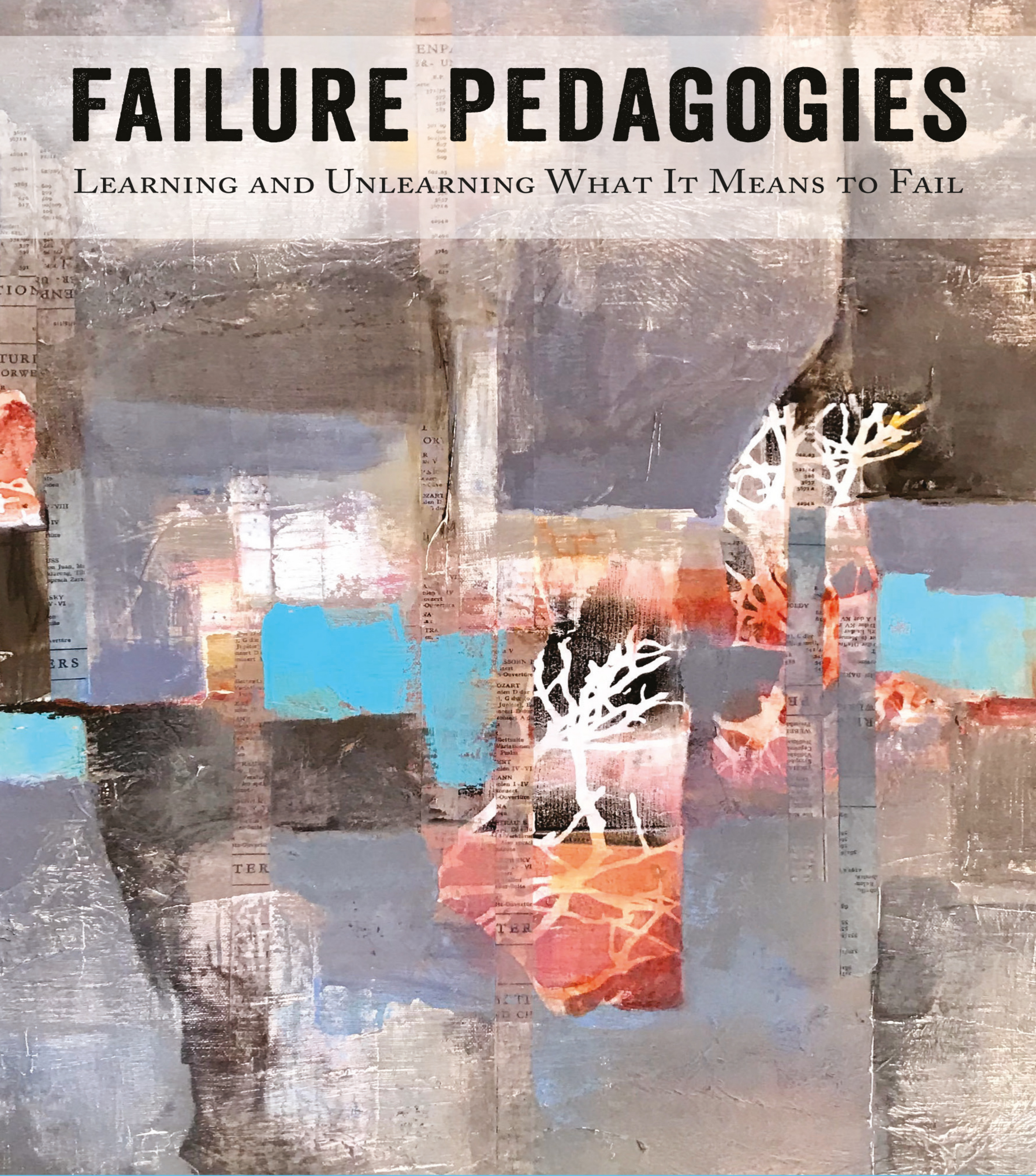
FAILURE PEDAGOGIES

Learning and Unlearning What It Means to Fail



ALLISON D. CARR & LAURA R. MICCICHE

EDITORS

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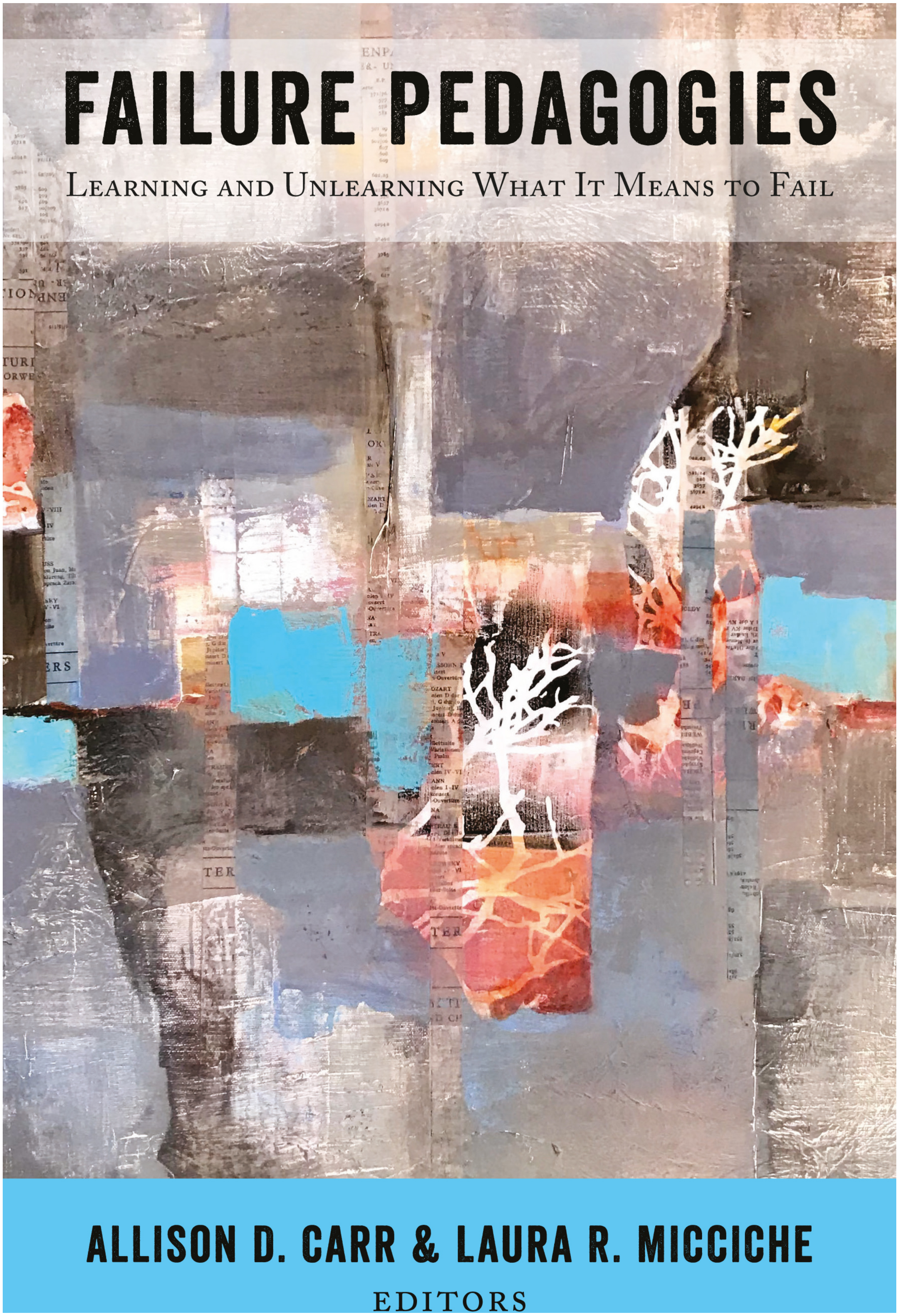

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What It Means to Fail

Edited by
Allison D. Carr and Laura R. Micciche

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About the book

Can we all learn from failure equally? *Failure Pedagogies* examines the ways failure is often appropriated to advantage those most likely to be insulated from the risks associated with pursuing it as a creative strategy. Contributors ask questions that examine what happens when failures do not necessarily lead to progress or innovation: How is risk distributed? For whom is failure "safe" and why? For whom is failure a real end rather than an opening to generative possibilities? To address these questions, we focus largely on pedagogical settings—classrooms, universities, and the conventions that reign there—but also configure pedagogy as a broad cultural practice that teaches acceptable and unacceptable forms of resistance, subversion, and risk. Contributors focus on a range of topics, including teaching and failure, language failures, fake news, disaster response failures, academic racism, sexual harassment and gender bias, queer failure, intersectionality and infertility activism, and institutional failures to imagine disabled bodies. *Failure Pedagogies* will be of interest to scholars, students, and teachers of writing, rhetoric, and popular culture.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures
Foreword: Failure, Fear, and Alternate Routes
    Chris Hay
Acknowledgments

Introduction: Failure’s Sweat
Allison D. Carr and Laura R. Micciche

Section I Embodied Failures

Chapter One When One Door Closes, Another Opens; Or, Appreciating Clichés

Caddie Alford

Chapter Two The Costs of Clarity

Alba Newmann Holmes and Kara Wittman

Chapter Three After the Accusation: The Lasting Impact of Plagiarism Trauma on Student Writing Behaviors

Kate Pantelides

Chapter Four Failure Potential: Using Failure as Feedback

Darci L. Thoune

Chapter Five Rhetorical Velocity and Fake News

Jim Ridolfo

Chapter Six Failure as Exigence: Accusation and Apology as Opportunities for (Re)invention

R. J. Lambert

Interchapter One Redefining Failure: Controlling a Sense of Self
Nancy G. Barrón and Sibylle Gruber

Section II Palpable Failures

Chapter Seven A Force of Disruption: Refusing the Success/Failure Complex

Anne Dalke

Chapter Eight Who Survives the Witch Hunt? Supporting Our Students in a Process We Know Will Fail Them

Shari J. Stenberg and Stacey Waite

Chapter Nine The Uses of Queer Failure: Navigating the Pedagogical Mandate of Happiness

Gavin P. Johnson and Ryan Sheehan

Chapter Ten Committing to Failure: Critical Pedagogy and Failure in Classroom Teaching

Jeanette Lehn

Chapter Eleven Messy Processes Into and Out of Failure: Professional Identities and Open-Access Writers

Cassandra Phillips and Joanne Baird Giordano

Interchapter Two Failure to Wake? What #WPAListservFeministRevolution Tells Us About a “Feminist” Writing Studies
Michelle LaFrance

Section III Pushy Failures

Chapter Twelve Persevering Even When “We Are All Full of Mad”: A Lesson in the Value of Incremental Progress

Julie Myatt

Chapter Thirteen “You Google *Infertility* and You Don’t See Me”: Towards an Intersectional Framework Resisting the Rhetorical Slippages of Reproductive Activism

Maria Novotny with Juliette Givhan

Chapter Fourteen Embracing the Ugly

Kara Taczak and Debbie Gale Mitchell

Chapter Fifteen Narrativizing Dis/Ability: Deconstructing Institutional Uses of Disability Narratives

Adam Hubrig

Interchapter Three *Papelitos Guardados,* Part I: On Collegiality and Failure
Aja Y. Martinez

Afterword: Failure and Letting Go
Asao B. Inoue

Contributors
Index

List of Figures

CHAPTER 7

Figure 7.1: Hands in Baltimore, photograph. Source: Lauren Barrow
Figure 7.2: Battle Scars, photograph. Source: Lauren Barrow
Figure 7.3: In the Beginning, photograph. Source: Lauren Barrow
Figure 7.4: Tribal Eyes, photograph. Source: Source: Lauren Barrow
Figure 7.5: Survival, photograph. Source: Lauren Barrow
Figure 7.6: Who I Am Today?, photograph. Source: Lauren Barrow
Figure 7.7: Man of Few Words, photograph. Source: Lauren Barrow

INTERCHAPTER 2

Figure IC.1: #WPAFeministListservRevolution, Twitter screen capture with permission from Amy Cicchino. Source: Author
Figure IC.2: Mansplainers, Facebook screen capture. Source: Author

←ix | x→

CHAPTER 12

Figure 12.1: The Sky’s the Limit (*Enfranchisement*), editorial cartoon. Source: Elmer A. Bushnell, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers 1916–1921, public domain, courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives

Figure 12.2: Home! Antisuffrage Cartoon. Source: Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women Records, Josephine A. Pearson Papers, public domain, courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives

CHAPTER 14

Figure 14.1: Student A: Gumball Habit Tracker, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.2: Student B: Mood Tracker, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.3: Student C: Gratitude Tracker, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.4: Student D: A prior knowledge sketch of a polymer, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.5: Student E: A prior knowledge sketch of a polymer, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.6: Student F: Glows & Grows, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.7: Student B: Glows & Grows, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.8: Student A: Glows & Grows, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.9: Student B: October Doodle Challenge, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors
Figure 14.10: Student I: SRR Over a Reading, sample from a bullet journal. Source: Authors

CHAPTER 15

Figure 15.1: The CCCC is Accessible, photograph. Source: Vyshali Manivannan, “Collective Action for Conference Accessibility”

Foreword: Failure, Fear, and Alternate Routes

CHRIS HAY

For a horrible moment, we thought we'd failed. The Chief Statistician for the Australian Bureau of Statistics, David Kalisch, had taken four minutes and six seconds to get to this point, before declaring:

> And now the official results of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey. For the national result, "Yes" responses: seven million, eight hundred and seventeen thousand, and two hundred and forty seven votes …

A pause, filled by the inaudible sound of queer activists' stomachs simultaneously dropping around the country. It didn't *sound* like enough—the Postal Survey had been voluntary, and while the total response figure had been reported earlier in Kalisch's speech, this was no time to rely on mental mathematics. He continued, "… representing sixty-one point six per cent of clear responses. That is, 61.6% of clear responses were ‘yes’.” He kept talking, but none of us heard: a colleague was banging against the wall that separated our offices in triumph; the students gathered below our windows were roaring. Marriage equality was finally on its way to becoming the law of the land.

The bland, procedural name of the instrument belied the seriousness of the stakes: For better or worse, the Marriage Law Postal Survey represented the culmination of years of activism towards marriage equality, and a loss in the popular vote would have taken the cause off Australia’s legislative agenda for the foreseeable ←xi | xii→ future. That the yes vote prevailed, then, must be understood as a success. Even so, it was a success that hid myriad failures: “We were being congratulated on ‘winning’ a contest we desperately did not want to compete in. We were celebrating something that had happened *to* us. Something that had been inflicted, without cause” (Shaw 2017, 271). The Postal Survey after all had not been a legislative necessity, but rather a compromise position adopted by the conservative government, who had “argued that any change must have the consent of the national electorate” (McAllister and Snagovsky 2018, 411). To do so, the government made use of an obscure procedure for a voluntary plebiscite of all enrolled voters, for only the fourth time in Australian history (see Copland 2018, 262).

For many queer folk and our allies, merely participating in the Postal Survey was a loaded choice, given the effrontery of the government outsourcing its legislative responsibilities to the electorate, and in so doing inviting the populace to participate in “months of debate about our humanity” (Shaw 2017, 271). High-profile queer rights campaigners, including the former judge of the High Court of Australia Justice Michael Kirby, proposed a boycott of the entire procedure; Kirby declared, “the less said about this irregular and unscientific polling the better. I’m not going to take any part in it whatsoever” (quoted in Yaxley 2017). We queers are practised failures, and no strangers to staying outside the system to question its legitimacy. In contesting Kirby’s resignation to failure, others asked questions similar to those posed by Jeanette Lehn in this volume: “Who pays for failures, and, if any insight is gained, who is set up to gain from that transaction”? The boycott movement forced us to confront a question that drives Shari Stenberg and Stacey Waite’s chapter: “What options for resistance exist?” In the end, there were very few such options: With teeth gritted to ward off failure, we joined the yes campaign (and, for what it is worth, eventually Kirby did too).

For every success during the campaign period, there had been a failure. For every heart-warming social media video of a campaigner coming out to a family member who then reassures them of their “yes,” a young person self-harmed in the wake of the publicly funded campaigns that clogged the airwaves (see Verrelli et al. 2019). Even the successful carriage of the vote was freighted with failures. When the detailed response data was reported, many of us were ashamed to discover the “no” vote had prevailed in our home electorates, even if our chosen homes had embraced the “yes” vote. I was shaken to discover that the rural, stereotypically conservative electorate where I had lived and worked during the campaign had recorded a majority for “yes,” while the suburban, purportedly progressive electorate in which I had grown up recorded a “no” majority. Those I’d grown up with, my old neighbors and school friends, had voted against my rights—which felt like a very personal failure indeed. In focusing on the big picture in the name of “respectful debate,” or perhaps in the name of self-preservation, had we merely “reinforced ←xii | xiii→a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness within the broader LGBTIQ community”? (Copland 2018, 268).

Across that period, like many of my queer colleagues on university campuses across the country, I had been forced to reflect on failure both inside and outside the classroom. Inside, my Theatre Studies students were experimenting with Halberstamian unlearning, following the path of “successful failure” to craft elegant solutions to performative problems. Outside, those same students sat in my office in tears, reliving the trauma of familial estrangement triggered by the “no” campaign’s focus on the heteronormative nuclear family as at perilous risk caused by marriage equality. Following from Darci L. Thoune’s contribution to this volume, my students and I were discovering that “the ability to recover from failure is a privilege—that not all failures are equal.” While inside the classroom “we are encouraged to see failure as a possible site of resistance in our attempt to subvert normative behaviour” (Barrón and Gruber), outside of it our students are grappling with “both the wounds and transformations that come from real failure” (Carr and Micciche). In other words, while failure “indexes an alternative route” (Bailes 2011, 2), that route is lined with the very real risk of pain and “being erased from the narrative” (Myatt).

If we want to declare in our pedagogy that failure works, that it can be productive, then our first questions must be *for whom does it work* and *what does it produce*? Cultural context and the intersections of the receiver of pedagogy shape the nature and intensity of failure. Taken together, the contributions to *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What it Means to Fail* focus the reader’s attention on the idea that “concepts like ‘failure’ … transmit sets of values that support a racial, gendered, class-based, and neoliberal status quo” (LaFrance), and encourage the reader to uncover the various structures and forces in which any particular invitation to failure is enmeshed. These structures are just as important as the failures themselves, raising questions of the need for sophisticated cultural competency in processing and recovering from failure. Furthermore, in considering the structures of failure, the work collected here reveals “the degree to which embracing failure as a route to success reifies the structure of achievement” (Dalke). All of the authors are grappling with what they feel is a pedagogical imperative to embrace failure, while working within systems that valorize success—often at all costs. Failure in these systems can therefore be understood as simultaneously productive and destructive; as Gavin P. Johnson and Ryan Sheehan ask, “Does every student have the potential to fail without destroying not only institutions but themselves?”

Fear of failure stalks the margins of higher education, for both students and staff, whether in the form of grade inflation, plagiarism paranoia, imposter syndrome, or the manifold other scenes described herein. Reading across this volume, we realize that “many of our experiences are not as special as we imagine them ←xiii | xiv→to be” (Alford). In naming the many professional failures they and their students have endured, the authors drain them of their stigma and democratize their experiences across disciplinary, institutional, and national boundaries. We *all* fear that we will fail, but too often “this fear displaces the conversations we *should* have” (Pantelides), and each of the chapters here act as prompts to those very conversations, reorienting our attention towards interrogating the material conditions that give rise to failure, the affect it produces, and the alternatives it generates. These prompts are ordered around and framed by the editors’ provocations in their introduction: “How is risk distributed? For whom is failure ‘safe’ and why? For whom is failure a real end rather than an opening to generative possibilities?” (Carr and Micciche).

In an age where the discourse of productive failure is deployed uncritically across the higher education sector and beyond, where Samuel Beckett’s (1983) misanthropic edict to “try again, fail again, fail better” graces everything from office coffee mugs to tennis player Stan Wawrinka’s forearm, it is critical to examine failure’s losers and winners. As this collection constantly reminds us, failure is not open access; the stakes are never even, nor the playing field level. And yet, as teachers and students of failure we persist, we go once more unto that breach in the hope that this time by failing again, by failing better, we might produce something worthwhile. This is the more complex understanding of failure advocated throughout these pages, casting it as *both* generative *and* painful; or as Cassandra Phillips and Joanna Baird Giordano put it, “we eventually had to redefine failure as part of the messy processes that have led us to where we are now—and it hasn’t been easy.” Much of this book encourages us to become comfortable with these “messy processes,” to acknowledge their affective power, and harness their potential despite the difficulties of so doing.

How might the 2017 Postal Survey with which this foreword began have been productive, then, if we had not been so fearful of failure? Might we have forged new relations that could have challenged social divisions rather than reinforced them? In the Australian general election that followed in 2019, widely expected to return the left-leaning opposition party to power, many of the same areas that had returned a “no” vote—more religious, less educated, and less affluent than the nation on average—swung instead towards the conservative incumbents, delivering them continued government (see Bowe 2019). If, through failure, we had been forced to confront the divisions in the electorate instead of celebrating our success in spite of them, what might have turned out differently? Collectively, the authors of *Failure Pedagogies* are much more concerned with "building or exploring a garden of forking paths" than with performing "trail maintenance" on existing routes (Holmes and Wittman). Adventurers all, they stride out into the wilderness in search of better. Such is the value of thinking through and with failure.

← xiv | xv →

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← xv | xvi →

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In addition, we are indebted to each other—for being there when the words wouldn’t come, when life made deadlines complicated, and when writing together (but physically apart) was a joy. Utterly liberating is knowing that a half-baked idea in the margins of a draft could, in the other’s hands, become a fully formed one. That transformation sometimes seemed magical, but it was the result of trust and belief that the other would find in the mess a clearing of some kind. What could have been experienced as failures of thought, imagination, and writing were normal parts of the process of cowriting—relay runners passing the baton. Writing solo seems dull and lonesome by comparison.

Laura thanks the English department at the University of Cincinnati for intellectual and material support. Also, Gary Weissman for the on-time advice and suggestions, kiddos for levity and perspective, felines for all the feels, and colleagues—especially Russel Durst and Chris Carter—for creating a great community of writers, teachers, and scholars at UC.

The idea for this book first arose in a phone call between us. I (Allison) was griping about some early-career frustration when I found myself fantasizing aloud about the kind of project I’d most like to do, but I couldn’t fathom how to pull it off. In a matter-of-fact tone that characterizes fully 90% of her counsel over the years, Laura said to me: “Why don’t you just do it? It’s a book. I’ll help.” Oh. Ok. As if it is that simple. I dragged my feet, struggling to believe that the idea was substantive enough for others to take interest, but a year later we were signing our contract with Peter Lang.

So, if I may be permitted a moment of gushing sentiment as we wind our thank-yous to a close: relations aside, there is probably nobody whose opinion I treasure more dearly, whose advice I weigh more heavily, and whose guidance has made more of an impact on my life—past, present, and future—than Laura’s. I have learned so much from our work together. Thank you for making this book with me.

I am grateful to my longtime writing group, Hannah Rule, Christina LaVecchia, Janine Morris, and emeritus member Katie Trauth Taylor, whose ongoing projects, advice, and friendship have inspired and motivated all of my professional writing, even if the uneven rhythms of our working lives means we aren't swapping drafts as frequently as we might like. Thanks also to my colleague Jesse Ellis, who taught me about behavioral ecology so that we could flesh out the metaphor that closes the introduction to this book. A second thank-you to Gary Weissman, this time for gently and correctly suggesting that metaphor should be edited down from a full page to a single paragraph.

Some years ago I was awarded an internal grant at Coe College to write what I thought would be my first solo-authored article after completing my dissertation. That article was unceremoniously rejected from our field's premiere journal, and it took me approximately twelve months before I had the courage to open the reader reports. By then, I was ready to accept their assessment: that there was something interesting in the manuscript, but it was too underdeveloped, and being made to compete with too many other nascent ideas. A year later, a revised version of the concept tumbled out of my mouth in the phone call described above. So, thank you to those anonymous readers, and to the Beahl and Irene H. Perrine Faculty Fellowship, which I suppose indirectly supported this project.

As with all achievements over the last decade, I would not have the intellectual and creative space to do any of my work without the support of my sweet husband, who is always waiting with a cocktail or a planned outing when the laptop closes. Thanks to the dogs, Elvis and Waylon, who patiently encourage daily movement by sighing heavily at my feet when I've been on the computer too long.

Lastly, a true story that is almost unbelievably on-the-nose: the call for proposals for this book was posted mere minutes before my first labor contraction. Ten hours later, my child drew his first breaths, letting out a wail so piercing and clear as to cause an instant, Copernican transformation of my universe. Every day since has been an exercise in humility, struggle, and profound hope. All of my labor is for you, my son; my failures are mine alone.

Introduction: Failure's Sweat

ALLISON D. CARR AND LAURA R. MICCICHE

If you've paid passing attention to academic or public discourse over the last decade, you may have noticed a growing, collective obsession with failure. The concept has wide utility as a motor for innovation in the business world and for resilience in educational contexts (Beare 2013; Brooke and Carr 2015; Burger 2012; Carr 2013, 2017; Rickly 2009, 2017 Sandage 2006; Smith 2010; see also: "grit" and "persistence" literature, especially Duckworth 2016; Dweck 2007; Gladwell 2011; and Seligman 1991). In fact, failure has gained so much traction that one might describe it as central to the "curriculum" of success. This trend makes concrete the relationship between failure and success that has long played a role in bootstraps ideologies pervasive within American progress narratives.

A central institution for the promotion of such ideology, higher education has enthusiastically embraced the failure-risk pairing, as exemplified by the surge of innovation centers or hubs conceived as incubators for startups and business-university partnerships designed to attract undergraduates and generate revenue for universities. With names like IdeaFactory (Texas Christian University), Venture Creations (Rochester Institute of Technology), StartR (University of California San Diego), and VentureLab (Georgia Tech), innovation centers number over 250 in the U.S. (“AcceleratorInfo.com”). About VentureLab, director Keith McGreggor says, “ ‘The 2008 housing collapse … really did send a big, strong signal throughout the economy to say ‘things can fail,’ and when things fail, people lose jobs. … When they lose jobs, they still need to keep on living. How do you safeguard against that? … Being able to create your own job is a huge safeguard against that’ ” ←1 | 2→(Gernon 2017). Failure, resilience, recovery, innovation, success—breadcrumbs on the path toward hopeful failure, coined “failing forward” by John Maxwell in his book of the same name (2007). Hope and progress are part of failure’s redemptive narrative, a script that is about wanting the right things, deemed so according to dominant norms and conventions, and having the means and mobility to achieve them (cf. Ahmed 2017).

In this book we treat failure as what Sara Ahmed calls a “sweaty concept,” meaning that, rather than emerging from “contemplation and withdrawal” (2017, 13), failure materializes from lived bodily experiences. “A concept is worldly,” writes Ahmed, and a “reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing. More specifically, a sweaty concept is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world” (13). For Ahmed, sweaty concepts

> might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty. We might need not to eliminate the effort or labor from the writing. Not eliminating the effort or labor becomes an academic aim because we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere. Sweaty concepts are also generated by the practical experience of coming up against a world, or the practical experience of trying to transform a world. (13)

A sweaty concept shows the labor involved in its making. This idea informs *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What it Means to Fail* in at least two ways. First, the variety of forms the chapters take show contributors laboring to represent failure without resorting to reassuring takeaways. And second, labor produces sweat, as does “strenuous and muscular activity” (Ahmed 2017, 13), but in order to appreciate that labor, we need to see bodies. Our contributors show bodies laboring toward respectability (Martinez), recognition (LaFrance), justice (Stenberg and Waite), and toward failure itself (Lehn), revealing bodily comportments that are unsettled by the labor of dealing with systemic failures. Their arguments are launched from positions of relative authority—veteran teacher-scholars and administrators—as well as from positions of precarity: graduate students, junior faculty, and contingent teacher-scholars. All working within educational institutions of one kind or another, our contributors are insiders trying to illuminate the strangeness of ordinary failures encountered with regularity.

As well, their arguments arise from bodies that are marked in a variety of ways, occupying multiple identity positions in tension. Contributors are white, brown, black, male, female, cisgendered, abled, disabled, queer, straight, American, Austrian, Australian, varied ages, and middle-class by virtue of working in academic institutions (we recognize that professional class is not experienced equally across differences). As editors, we write from our positions as cisgendered straight white women who occupy relatively stable positions in academia. We don’t like failing, ←2 | 3→but we also haven’t been ruined by failure or diverted from our paths because of it. Our privileges are many: white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied, just for starters. Because of the limitations of our own imaginings, we sought to gather together sweaty experiences of failure in this volume that exceed our own and that resist depicting failure as a curriculum of success. In the chapters that follow, authors enlarge understandings of failure and thereby illuminate how failure is unthinkable as a singular concept leaning toward success. Failure is always modified by bodily experiences and forms of knowing. Collectively, this book raises questions concerning how to work within institutional parameters and still manage to call them into question, unsettling the very structures that serve hierarchies one wishes to escape, jam, disrupt.

In the process of attaching embodied specificity to failure, contributors help us see how failure has been wittingly and unwittingly appropriated to advantage those most likely to be insulated from risks associated with pursuing or embracing failure as a creative strategy. That is, mindful of how social inequities leave some unbuffered from the consequences of failure, this book challenges claims that code failure as an edgy or desirable strategy for achieving success. By remembering that not all failures are equal, our contributors call attention to failure in its particularity—something that happens to people and that people can inhabit, push against, and build from.

Contributors to this volume ask questions that examine what happens when failures do not necessarily lead to progress or innovation: How is risk distributed? For whom is failure "safe" and why? For whom is failure a real end rather than an opening to generative possibilities? To address these questions, we focus largely on pedagogical settings—classrooms, universities, and the conventions that reign there. Following Lynn Worsham's conceptualization of pedagogy in "Going Postal," we understand pedagogy as a broad cultural practice that "locates individuals objectively in a hierarchy of power relations [and] organizes their affective relations to that location, to their own condition of subordination, and to others in that hierarchical structure" (223). In other words, while we recognize educational institutions as de facto sites of pedagogical immersion, we are interested in the cultural systems, rhetorical paradigms, and affective structures writ large that teach acceptable and unacceptable forms of resistance, subversion, and risk entailed when "encouraging failure."

While we address this issue through largely academic frames of reference, during the editing process we have sought to push against abstraction in order to arrive at detailed accounts of how failure works. In addition, we have limited most authors to around 5,500 words in a conscious attempt to feature micro studies of failure that require minimal wind-up and maximum focus (not what we’d call a typical characteristic of academic writing). In terms of form, we sought diversity. Included in this volume are a meditative essay (Holmes and Wittman), ←3 | 4→an illustrated bullet journal (Taczak and Mitchell), a retrospective (Ridolfo), social-media inspired pastiche (LaFrance), a counter-narrative (Martinez), a dialogic essay (Thoune), and a cliché-ridden reclamation of the cliché as inventive form (Alford). In this way, our efforts at the level of word, sentence, and form mirror the larger effort of this book to show failure’s sweat.

Failure Pedagogies is divided into three sections that interrelate and sometimes overlap: embodied failures, palpable failures, and pushy failures. These sections are framed by three narrative interchapters that foreground how commonplace, routine experiences within higher education accumulate to reveal systemic failures. Functioning as documentary snapshots of system fails, these interchapters by Nancy G. Barrón and Sibylle Gruber, Michelle LaFrance, and Aja Y. Martinez operate as grounding touch-points throughout the volume, reminding us of failure’s tight braid with personal and professional identity.

Section one, Embodied Failures, focuses on the consequences of failing to recognize language as embodied by people’s experiences. Contributors examine familiar writing pedagogy injunctions to eliminate cliché (Alford), champion clarity (Wittman and Holmes), punish plagiarism (Pantelides), and offer feedback to student writers (Thoune). These studies foreground language as a dwelling place through which novice writers work out their lived experiences. In addition, chapters in this section examine how language circulates in the public sphere via social media, presenting opportunities for disruption and contestation. On the one hand, we see the political consequences of proliferating “fake news” when language is not easily traced back to real people (Ridolfo); on the other, we see people using public discourse, including social media, to challenge corporate responses to crisis—in this case, to the Deepwater Horizon environmental crisis (Lambert). When British Petroleum CEO Tony Hayward fails to take responsibility for the devastation caused by the oil spill, citizens and journalists hijack the narrative to reveal the embodied trauma glossed by corporate discourse. For both Jim Ridolfo and R.J. Lambert, language failures beget productive resistance.

Section two, Palpable Failures, features contributions that explore failure as a tangible experience that reroutes lives, feelings, forms of identification. Contributors reveal the tensions and challenges that arise when individual bodies come up against institutional structures, complicating celebratory “failing to succeed” imperatives. Anne Dalke shows us what happens when students and faculty from an elite women’s college (where failure is assumed to be a speed bump on the way to success) are brought into cooperative proximity with men incarcerated at an area prison (where failure is predetermined) and encounter as well structures designed to prevent such a co-mingling. Shari Stenberg and Stacey Waite frame university Title IX policies as a witch hunt designed to fail the victims they purportedly serve, leading to a failure of justice and of compassion. Gavin P. Johnson and Ryan Sheehan call failure a “queer force” that challenges “the systematic ←4 | 5→logic of happiness as a marker of success in pedagogical contexts.” To illustrate, they narrate two stories that detail competing desires and ambivalent outcomes in academic institutions and offer “navigation” as an alternative concept that draws attention to “the labor of strategizing, and weighing expectation against personal desire” in situations where failure may result, but is not a predetermined destination. Next, Jeanette Lehn confronts her own white fragility in teaching situations as a practitioner of critical pedagogy, where the stakes are high and failure is inevitable. Finally, Cassandra Phillips and Joanne Baird Giordano reflect on the failure of their own institution to uphold the values of access and equity in a series of punishing, politically motivated slash-and-burn decisions, a too-common story for which there is no happy resolution. As a group, these essays foreground both the wounds and transformations that come from real failure.

The final section, Pushy Failures, focuses on advocacy efforts to push against “failing forward” initiatives and to reimagine failure’s value for social justice movements and acts of reflection. We see how social justice is an incremental process, a series of coordinated, persistent pushes, in a study of Tennessee suffragists working toward passage of the 19th amendment (Myatt). Then, Maria Novotny and Juliette Givhan demonstrate the failure of infertility advocacy efforts to account for intersectionality, a reminder that even marginalized movements require pushes for inclusion. Next, written in the form of an illustrated bullet journal and arguing for that same form as a tool for documenting generative failures, Kara Taczak and Debbie Gale Mitchell push for multimodal reflective writing that dwells in failure. In the last chapter, Adam Hubrig examines institutional misuses of disability and calls for the feralization of disability narratives in an effort to force institutional accountability and produce more just futures for disabled people.

As bookends to the volume, Chris Hay's foreword and Asao Inoue's afterword offer critical perspectives on the ambivalence of failure. Hay describes the successful passage of the Marriage Law Postal Survey, which legalized marriage equality throughout Australia in 2017. Appearing on the surface as an unambiguous win for egalitarian progress, Hay complicates the matter by identifying its origin as, itself, a failure of the legislature (which effectively abdicated its responsibility in relying on an obscure procedure). What's more, recent elections resulting in the continued rule of the conservative incumbent party rather than expected gains for the opposition party can be blamed on the success of the marriage equality law. Did progressive activists rest too keenly on their laurels, or fail to see the lingering divisions between neighbors? Another failure? In the discussion, his essay offers a robust illustration of what it means to "[reorient] our attention towards interrogating the material conditions that give rise to failure, the affect it produces, and the alternatives it generates." Closing the book, Inoue reveals his continuing fear of failure, despite his many professional successes, and also calls into question the demographics of those who speak about failure in this book. Both Hay and Inoue add provocative questions that resist conclusive answers and make room for continue research aimed at unsettling failure as progress narrative: fitting for a volume aiming for, and perhaps not always achieving, the same.

←5 | 6→

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What results when we bring together pedagogy and sweat? Put another way, when the institutional/organizational forces of pedagogy collide (or are brought into proximity) with the “strenuous and muscular activity” that produces sweat, what new concepts emerge? Following Hubrig, it may be useful to think of this conceptual recombination as leading to feralization. In behavioral ecology, feral organisms are those which have retreated from the domestic, adapting to reproduce and thrive free from the constraints of human influence. But feralization does not signify a “return” to wildness, to a pre-domesticated state. Instead, in the context of their evolutionary history, organisms that have gone feral are distinct from their “wild type” (pre-domestic) counterparts in significant ways, precisely for having “passed through” or adapted to domestication. Importantly, feralization does not require a total relocation to some imagined “wild” otherwhere. Rather, organisms maintain position in the ecosystem, meeting its refining pressure with a countervailing thriving instinct. Here is where sweat beads, where the brute force of exertion comes up against structures that would discipline it.

The chapters that follow illustrate a feralizing potential. Singly and collectively, authors take stock of learned behaviors and perspectives in order to unlearn and undiscipline the paradigms and pedagogies of success and failure that govern what is possible in the world. This last point is crucial, for while our authors (and, for the most part, the objects of their critique) are located inside educational structures, their gaze—and by extension, their exertion—radiates outward, offering potential adaptations for rethinking failure writ large.

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SECTION I

Embodied Failures

←9 | 10→

←10 | 11→

CHAPTER ONE

When One Door Closes, Another Opens; Or, Appreciating Clichés

CADDIE ALFORD

THE DICE ARE LOADED

Addressing clichés, the University of Nebraska’s Writing Center advises that “They should be avoided ‘like the plague’ ” (University of Nebraska, n.d.). The University of Richmond’s Writing Center warns that clichés “often sneak in the barn door (that’s a cliché, by the way) when we try to be descriptive” (University of Richmond, n.d.). Harvard admits that “avoiding clichés altogether is *easier said than done*” (Cooper 1999).

They’re being cute, of course. With each cliché mocked in scare quotes, explained away in parentheses, and downplayed in italics, writing centers everywhere communicate what has become cliché about clichés: they’re cliché. Falling back on clichés is an easy writing impulse that is tolerable as long as it does not become the focus or anchor of the writing itself. Clichés are meaningless little failures.

The Writing Center at University of North Carolina similarly asserts that using “clichés make you seem lazy. They are a hedge when you don’t want to do creative work” (University of North Carolina, n.d.). The Texas A&M University Galveston Campus Writing Center refers to clichés as “inappropriate” (Texas A&M University Galveston, n.d.). Villanova’s Writing Center identifies “the empty cliché” as a “poor” idea (Fernandez and Morro 2011).

Lazy. Inappropriate. Poor.

←11 | 12→

I recognize that this might seem like an idiosyncratic sampling, but many writing centers’ online resources at a variety of institutions tend to toggle between naming the dead metaphor as a nuisance and judging the writer for using a dead metaphor. This predictable spectrum suggests that in practice, clichés demand erasure. Appearing as lazy or inappropriate is, after all, failing to meet unspoken expectations.

The implication when writing centers refer to the use of clichés as an “empty” choice that acts as a “hedge when you don’t want to do creative work” is that the writer employing a cliché *also*, in a manner of speaking, needs to be erased. Using a cliché is considered a failure—a failure to respond to the prompt or exercise creativity or, indeed, a failure to belong in higher education in the first place. Thinking further about clichés, essayist Leslie Jamison comments that the phrase “easy platitude” always strikes her as odd because the people she knows “who use the most platitudes are the ones who have led the hardest lives” (Jamison 2015). “It’s useful,” she elaborates, “to consider the relationship between platitudes and difficulty—not only the difficult experiences that might make platitudes useful, rudders to steer by, but also the difficulty involved in living by them” (Jamison 2015). How is it that words to live by are now words to avoid? The dice, as the saying goes, are loaded.

Clichés have long been considered failures in composition studies, a disciplinary area haunted by correction. Both Ryan J. Stark and Cathryn Molloy point to writing handbooks and manuals that cast clichés as enemies of clear and compelling writing. Stark, for instance, highlights an analogy in Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors's *The Everyday Writer* between clichés and paint-by-numbers. Stark claims this analogy implies a failure on the student's part to be "an aesthete of sorts" (Stark 1999, 455). Molloy turns to Diana Hacker's *Pocket Style Manual*, which states clichés can "no longer surprise," suggesting the writer's failure to entertain and mystify readers (Molloy 2010, 140). In both of those instructional texts, teachers of writing are to withhold clichés from students, withholding in turn the most common of knowledge in the name of teaching students how to insert themselves into conversations. In doing so, we maintain what Dawn Skorczewski calls the imbalanced "dance of power that is the academic institution" (Skorczewski 2000, 222).

Among other things, clichés are mechanisms of higher educational gatekeeping. Those who use clichés are considered too entrenched in the everyday to produce writing worthy of academia. Clichés are just too common and too worn-out; they're too much chorus and not enough solo. They fail to produce meaning because they fail at specificity. Jamison acknowledges that as a writer, clichés unnerve her because of the ways they suggest that many of our experiences are not as special as we imagine them to be. And perhaps most damning is that "the cliché's appearance in a text generates an anxiety of class" (Jamison 2015). By that, ←12 | 13→Jamison means that clichés are neither specialized jargon nor prestigious social markers. They belong to the people.

In a 2018 episode of *Slate*'s podcast, *The Culture Gabfest*, Stephen Metcalf glibly condemns clichés, revealing classist reverberations. Apparently speaking on behalf of thoughtful people everywhere, Metcalf confirms with carelessness "all of the *thinking* person's contempt" for "received or dead language" (Metcalf, Stevens, and Turner 2018). In doing so, Metcalf sets up a cliché hierarchy, suggesting a split (one of the oldest in the book!) between elite language practices and the tendencies of the plebs. The irony writes itself.

Spending time on what online writing center materials perpetuate matters because these resources are open-access, easy to find, and students may very well treat them like ‘objective’ writing handbooks. In terms of the writing instruction paradigm that the writing centers in my opening are working within, clichés fail because this paradigm is still predicated on Romantic values. Clichés “admit communal knowledge-making practices,” but we are clearly more comfortable operating under the assumption that the individual creates knowledge (Molloy 2010, 141). The idea that wisdom travels in inherited packs threatens the Romantic investment in the writer’s ownership, control, and mastery of language.

But the provenance of failure is a point of view, not an enduring rule, and the conditions for what constitutes failure continually evolve. Our writing pedagogies need to reflect these changes. We need to reclaim the cliché for what it is: a strategy for sizing up a variety of situations. After all, the current era of social media is steeped in examples of trite repetition that not only persist, but also revolutionize. We hear echoes that for some do not irritate so much as incite (“lock her up!”); hashtags become worn-out, yet still amplify select groups (#MeToo); and everyday truisms stabilize even the most precarious realities (“It sure is a scorcher today!”). As writing teachers, we might celebrate and work within an appreciation for what could be known as the golden age of clichés, but instead, as our writing centers illuminate, we choose apathy and sometimes even distrust. What does it mean to scratch out a student’s cliché in light of “drain the swamp!”? Can clichés truly fail in the wake of alternative truths? Who exactly does this gatekeeping benefit? Just as importantly, who does this gatekeeping protect?

In this exploratory piece, I promote the pedagogical value of working with students’ written clichés by elevating their rhetorical import. To do so, I perform scholarly generosity of spirit toward something writing teachers have all but given up on: canned phrases that mean so much they appear to mean nothing. I establish clichés as vital pieces of the western rhetorical tradition, arguing that writing teachers could enrich their pedagogies by acknowledging and mining the effects, actions, and implications of clichés. Noticing where clichés fit in the story of rhetoric is acknowledging them as sites of invention. Establishing clichés' rich longevity, I advocate for a radical pedagogy that politicizes clichés. Naturally, this ←13 | 14→pedagogy comes back to point of view, or as Jamison offers, "whether you think of clichés as portals or conclusions" (Jamison 2015). We fail our students if we see their clichés—our clichés—as failed conclusions because then the dice really are loaded, and they're loaded against the students who roll them.

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

> Clichés lend structure and ritual and glue: They are the subterranean passageways connecting one life to another.
>
> —Leslie Jamison

To really think about cliché is to end up inevitably at spatial metaphors of congregating and connecting. They are, as Leslie Jamison articulates, "subterranean passageways" that lead to holding something in common, if only briefly. "Back to square one," for instance, is a classic cliché about failure; it's the cliché you say when starting over. "Back to square one" invokes and links an array of feelings in relation to failure, including the encroachment of fatigue onto hope (Is it possible to start over again with the same enthusiasm?); worry over the pointlessness of it all (Is it a square, really, or a closed circle?); the clenched jaw, assessing another try, or the sighs, welcoming an end of sorts. Within a shared discourse, I say, "back to square one" and the cliché assembles all these bodily stances and emotions toward failure into a single moment that both glosses my experience *and* positions others in the experience. Clichés produce a gathering, a transient forum of mutual understanding and feeling.

From a rhetorical perspective, clichés call to mind the classical conception of the commonplace, or the topics the rhetor visits to develop a line of argument. Aristotle defines a topic as “the thought and the sources of argument and how we shall refute them” (Aristotle, 2.26.5). Each topic spatializes the available means of persuasion by circumscribing categories of argumentative fodder: Look here for the rumors that might undermine someone’s credibility or comb through the effects of a controversial ban.

The cliché is like a rhetorical topic in that it provides a place to scrounge up materials to bolster a viewpoint. Through repetition, tried and true tactics become cultural sayings that people habituate as offerings. “Back to square one” is a discursive bridge from Point B, a resolution and/or resignation, to Point A, perhaps another failed endpoint. No matter how varied our experiences are with failure, we can commune over “back to square one”—you with your exasperation and me with my shame; you with your expectations for future success and me with a moment, a pause, to ponder my own productivity. In the time it takes to exhale, “back to square one” allowed both of us to process the simultaneously robust and ornery event that is failing, failure, and the attempt to start over again.

←14 | 15→

“Back to square one” is therefore a commonplace that not only provides a pertinent response to failed plans, but also allows room for emotional bonding and rebinding. Ruth Amossy, a foremost theorist of received knowledge, writes that a cliché is a commonplace “in which emotional identification can occur” (Amossy 1982, 32). The cliché “insures a circular relationship between ‘I’ and ‘you,’ ” one in which there is room for consensual exchange (Amossy 1982, 35). Such relationships are ripe for rhetorical invention, as both parties co-draw from the cliché’s expansive well of associations and felt intuitions. A cliché is nostalgic, a holding place of memories and lost souls. A cliché is a timekeeper, a flexible record of personal growth. A cliché is also practical wisdom distilled into a mnemonic; it’s meant to be carried around. Back to square one: a personalized archive of new responses.

Invention is contingent, however, on immediate beliefs, dispositions, and recollections as well as frameworks of more global values regarding taste and rhetorical effectiveness. Change the broader values, change the act of invention. The concept of a cliché—an overly copied figurative phrase to avoid—did not exist until the nineteenth century (Amossy 1982, 35). It is important to spend time considering the journey the cliché has made in the public consciousness because its beginnings complicate our contemporary rigidity toward them.

In the classical framework, what we consider clichés today—“it’s better to be safe than sorry” or “don’t count your chickens before they hatch”—were not considered drained throwaways but stable stock phrases and somewhat alluring proverbial suppliers of intellect and logic. Michel Foucault underscores that clichés were once used to work through the elaborate puzzle of self-knowledge. When clichés were not defined as things to revise out of your creative process, ancient Greeks, for instance, thought of them as witty phrases and venerable maxims that a writer should actually try to nail down. In ancient Greece, it was customary to maintain *hupomnemata*, or commonplace books: “One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind” (Foucault 1997, 209). The point of commonplace books was not to journal individual thoughts or to archive confessions, but “to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault 1997, 211). Paradoxically, in this culture, assimilating to the collective meant cultivating a civic-minded and cosmopolitan individual.

For the ancient Greeks, the raw and over-circulated ties that bind provided foundations for rhetorical invention: learn the foundations and create what you want to say or embellish at any point. With the shift to “cliché” in the modern period, however, stock phrases assumed a pejorative tinge, complete with dualistic baggage. As Amossy articulates, the “notion of the cliché implies a conception of repetition as parroting and must necessarily be based on a dichotomy between ←15 | 16→Creation and

Imitation, Originality and Banality, the Individual and the Collective" (Amossy 1982, 35). These dichotomies continue to call the cliché's inventiveness into question. It is also these dichotomies, though, that reveal the cliché's complexities. More than a little similar to rhetoric on an abstract level, the cliché "belongs … to rhetoric at the same time it displaces rhetoric's boundaries and objectives" (Amossy 1982, 35). In their guises as hollow placeholders, clichés bring about compromise between me, with what I want to communicate, and you, with what you believe already.

Acknowledging the cliché's deeply suasive nature can be generative for writing classrooms. As the next section examines, an empowering writing pedagogy is one that radicalizes the rhetorical strategies students already own and live through; on day one, most students have clichés at the ready, which means not only are they prepared to invent, but they are also susceptible to clichéd appeals. Clichés are potent directional cues during the inventional process, but clichés are also being used at the national level to dog whistle and gaslight. It is imperative, therefore, that we take clichés seriously in writing curricula. Teaching students that clichés are rich in substance and action is teaching them a more robust theory of persuasion—persuasion doesn't get to be a product of fully original and scintillating efforts when something like a cliché can guarantee what Stark terms a "connective pathos," for better or for worse (Stark 1999, 454). A simple "back to square one" and together we have accomplished so much.

WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER

Perhaps the most famous essay on clichés, George Orwell's 1946 "Politics and the English Language" condemns "verbal refuse" for veiling and sustaining totalitarian agendas (Orwell 1946). All the ambiguity and interpretative room that clichés offer—the same qualities I praise as both inventive and social—can also, over time, mold political affiliations. With ease, the cliché's familiarity comes across as sound logic, even when the cliché is technically introducing an unethical policy or amplifying demagoguery. To Orwell, all political language is clichéd, “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable” because we trust what we have heard and used before (Orwell 1946). A case in point, Donald Trump recently delivered his first Oval Office address to the nation, clarifying that the blood in the cliché of “blood being spilt” is emphatically American blood, at the hands of ‘illegal’ immigrants (Trump 2019).

In today’s political climate, clichés feel especially dangerous, and rightly so. That is why it is more important than ever to teach them, expose them, and scaffold them as rhetorical tools and hooks. You know what they say: what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

←16 | 17→

As both common topics for arguments and seemingly innocent embellishments that “give an appearance of solidity to pure wind,” clichés beg for the kind of critical inquiry composition courses require (Orwell 1946). Indeed, writing courses often have learning outcomes that speak to fine-tuning students’ analytical skills. Clichés, and the broader political commonplace reality of our lives, present an urgent, if implicit, exigence, which could be used to foster those analytical skills. And yet, if writing centers are any indication, writing teachers have been telling students for a while to avoid clichés. Michigan State University’s writing center, for instance, advises students to avoid types of introductions that “have become tired and clichéd” (Maynar 2015). The Writing Center at University of Wisconsin-Madison promises that “one detail is worth a thousand clichés” (University of Wisconsin, n.d.). Reed College’s Doyle Online Writing Lab links to Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language”—not because it is a radical illustration of resistance, but because it is “a clever piece on writing good prose” (Reed College, n.d.). These and other writing centers appear to favor correction over nuanced thinking (or “critical thinking,” a cliché if there ever were one). Clichés survive because they are concealed in their innocuous familiarity. Avoiding them only makes them stronger agents of extreme political consequences. When popular textbooks like David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen’s *Writing Analytically* label clichés “trite, prefabricated forms of nonthinking,” they are continuing what is now the tradition of underestimating the intersections between clichés and material conditions (Rosenwasser and Stephen 2012, 257). How can a rhetorical commonplace be equivalent to “nonthinking”?

Even those who are more generous toward clichés remain conflicted, including Mark Abley, who recently published *Watch Your Tongue: What Our Everyday Sayings and Idioms Figuratively Mean*. Trying to distinguish between clichés and idioms, Abley claims that “clichés are monotonous: they have a single tone. They make the same point over and over” (Abley 2018). Paragraphs before, however, he contradicts himself, noting that “what you deplore as a cliché, I may cherish as a soul-stirring idiom,” suggesting clichés are both contextual and polysemous (Abley 2018). It is difficult to be consistent about clichés because they *are* prefabricated, sometimes emerging without a moment’s notice, and they *do* delimit some boundaries of consensus, but they also augment existing biases.

Today, one of the most significant ways that clichés structure orientations is as dog whistles. Abley explains that the “dog whistle” expression “means the use of coded messages to reach certain targeted groups, without the rest of the public being aware what’s going on” (Abley 2018). For example, some common dog whistles have been “inner cities” and “law and order.” In that same Oval Office address, Trump refers to “illegal aliens” and their violent crimes against American citizens (Trump 2019). Though often presented as a technical or juridical term, “illegal aliens” functions more as a commonplace dog whistle signifying racist fears ←17 | 18→of otherness for those tuned into its conservative tenor. After repeated exposures to this appeal, it’s no wonder that many in Trump’s base feel justified in believing some lives matter more than others. When we stop to realize how clichés can add to that kind of worldview, it becomes impossible to bracket them.

And yet, prohibiting students from using clichés in their writing tells them that clichés are filler—just another instance of “empty rhetoric.” It has been fifty-two years since the publication of J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, which took the time to spell out the basic fact that words cause things to happen. Writing teachers should know better, full stop. There is no such thing as empty rhetoric. There is, however, a difference between over-writing, with clunky articles and prepositions, and phrases that are inspired by the rhetorical tasks at hand. Of course, I recognize that not all uses of clichés are effective; Skorczewski, for instance, implies arrangement can be an issue when students place a “trite or overused phrase” right after addressing “the complexities of institutional power, multiple identities, and situated knowledge” (Skorczewski 2000, 221). The clichés we find in student writing could be more impactful and more stylized, but we are not giving them a chance to hone these strategies or to recognize their potential import. Consequently, we are not preparing them adequately for tackling dog whistles. I, for one, am not comfortable enacting “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” as an ongoing lesson plan.

Rather than ban clichés or evaluate clichés as failings, then, I suggest we handle clichés more generously in the writing classroom. In my own experience, working with students’ clichés has led to more sophisticated arguments. For instance, in an argumentative writing course I taught a couple years ago, I assigned an evaluative review of the first season of AMC’s television show *Better Call Saul*. A student submitted a draft for an individual conference and I noticed that their conclusion relied on two clichés: “take off the chains” and “burn bridges.” According to the UNC Writing Center, those phrases warrant comments so typical we could call the commenting itself clichéd: “too general” and “be more specific” (University of North Carolina, n.d.). But how would those comments help the student revise the draft? What would it tell them if I only fixated on those two figurative phrases rather than on the overarching argument? How can I call myself a rhetoric/composition scholar if I leave rhetoric out of my pedagogical practice?

During this conference, we had a conversation that actually highlighted the clichés as the argument’s epicenter. The student and I worked on seeing how the two phrases in tandem, “take off the chains” and “burn bridges,” evoke a sense of liberation. Rather than reading the clichés as empty, I interpreted them as a starting point the student hadn’t fully realized. This suggestion of liberation was interesting because up until this point, the student had been claiming *Better Call Saul* is a show that intimates everyone's past immoral actions will stain them. The ←18 | 19→student's two clichés, then, complicate that narrative. I praised that move, reminding both of us that effective conclusions give readers fresh perspectives through claims that have matured in complexity.

Instead of telling students what not to do, effectively dismissing the rhetoricity of clichés and implying the students failed to "be specific" or original, working with clichés bolsters students' sense of themselves as writers doing things with their choices, however intuitive or subconscious those choices are. The student ended up removing the clichés from the conclusion, but the conclusion became stronger because of what the clichés revealed to both of us about how to end their review effectively. So, while there are limitations to the clichés per se, they can still help reveal potent directions to take in the writing itself.

We sometimes assume that when students use clichés they are engaging in a sort of rhetorical throat-clearing; the Colby College Writing Program tells students not to use clichés because "they are an easy escape" (Colby College, n.d.). I had one student who seemed to be doing this when they started their review by referring to a subplot—the Kettlemans' legal case—as "stirring the pot." This one cliché signaled an organizing principle for the review: "stirring the pot" gives way to a broader metaphorical through-line. That is, *Better Call Saul* is a slow-burning show. The Kettlemans are white collar criminals. They are not flashy. And yet the show allows their storyline to simmer, withholding instant gratification in favor of mature plot development. The deliberate plot development is ultimately more rewarding for the care that goes into it. "Stirring the pot" is quite literally what the show does the entire season.

Far from being something that detracted from my reading of this draft, the cliché offered a way for me to discuss revisions with the student. To point to a subplot as "stirring the pot" is to acknowledge that this subplot is conducting the show's rhythms. The best television reviewers out there, including *The New Yorker*'s Emily Nussbaum, spin conceptual frameworks from insightful observations about subplots. Situating their move within popular and lauded generic moves could help a student gain confidence while navigating organization choices.

Working with students' use of clichés enriches the act of composing. Clichés in writing do not mean that the student is lazy or merely trying to meet the word count. From an affirmative vantage, clichés in writing signal problem-solving about difficult audience-centered moves. Of course, there is still a lot of work to be done with this incredibly rich discursive object: When, for instance, does a cliché get to become an extended metaphor? For now, though, I'm interested simply in making the case for taking clichés more seriously. To blanket these attempts as "trite" is to suggest that cultural logics act through us, without personal salience or agency. As Sharon Crowley reminds us, rhetoric, and by extension writing, is "an art of invention," requiring the widest available scope—a scope we ought to expand, not limit, for students (Crowley 2003).

NOTHING VENTURED, NOTHING GAINED

> Clichés are magically convincing, i.e. produce a sort of enchantment which needs an emotional participation in the general cadence of the words and sounds.
>
> —Anton C. Zijderveld

Anton C. Zijderveld's sensual and somewhat charmed description of clichés immediately brings to mind a different kind of enchantment: cookery, or Socrates' famous attack on rhetoric as mere pandering. Rhetoric itself always seems to fail in Plato's framework because giving the audience what they find most pleasing fails to do right by what is best for their souls. I can't help but see the connection here between the canonical dismissal of rhetoric as cookery and common views of clichés as platitudes intended to flatter or entice readers rather than get at the truth of one's ideas or experiences. Indeed, we dismiss students for using clichés as if their use aims to please us or insert filler—what we don't typically consider is that students might use clichés as a way to mimic academic writing moves.

Part of what my re-evaluation of clichés shows is that this Platonic dichotomy between rhetoric as truth and rhetoric as cookery—good versus bad rhetoric—isn't especially helpful when thinking about something as complex as clichés. Clichés do have a kind of magic, but like rhetoric, their magic comes not so much from their superficial dazzle as it does from the productive interplay they spark between appearance and reality, or rhetoric's age-old focus on content/form dynamics. Rivka Galchen likens clichés to "old talismans dug up at an archaeological site" (Galchen 2015). Clichés lead to a tension between the contact high from something familiar and the density of its circulated wisdom.

Moreover, clichés not only strengthen arguments and establish identification between readers and writers, but they also play integral roles in political discourse, with all the messy advantages and liabilities that come with that. It is safe to say that clichés constitute some of the raw material of rhetorical action; clichés are firmly ensconced within the structures of rhetoric itself. As raw inventional materials, clichés cannot on their own constitute failures.

I conclude this piece by turning more explicitly to my final framing cliché: "nothing ventured, nothing gained." This phrase is invested in failure because it is open to trajectories of risk that could turn sour just as easily as achieve success. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" encompasses an entire philosophy theorizing the nature of taking a chance, stressing the importance of appreciating risk. In contrast to clichés like "better safe than sorry" or "the benefits outweigh the costs," "nothing ventured nothing gained" encourages humility in the face of failure. Risks are necessary, and any impending failures from those risks are necessary, too. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" reminds us that enacting responsibility toward failure is not a sign of weakness—it's a sign of strength.

In this way, “nothing ventured, nothing gained” dovetails nicely with a recent speech that itself interrogates the act of failing: Stacey Abrams’ Democratic response to Trump’s 2019 State of the Union. It would be easy to judge the Trump administration as a complete failure in the traditional sense—a moment to jump ship, so to speak, and try to move on. Abrams, however, reframes this particular failure. She assuredly spins a narrative of America that is predicated not just on failure, but on a responsible kind of failure—the kind of failing that knows when to take stock, quit, and pick up the pieces. The kind of failing, in other words, that knew to fight the failure of “Jim Crow with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act” (Abrams 2019). As a whole, Abrams argues, America has demonstrated a responsible way of failing time and time again: nothing ventured, nothing gained, so “where we falter, we make amends” (Abrams 2019).

America is faltering right now, with the Trump administration continuing to treat xenophobia as solid ground when it is our “extraordinary diversity” that we should be turning to instead (Abrams 2019). The answer has been in front of us this whole time, made cliché by how often it has been passed down and expressed: nothing ventured, nothing gained. It is better to embrace and learn from the moment of failure than it is to try to ignore what failure can teach us. The same principle holds for the writing classroom.

And so I urge teachers of writing, myself included, to assume responsibility for the failure of underestimating the value of clichés. Clichés are risks that our students take to address problems; as mature, thoughtful, and original writing, they can sometimes appear like failures, but as Stacey Abrams’s speech suggests, failures are generative as long as we confront them head-on. Stuart Greene and April Lidinsky’s *From Inquiry to Academic Writing* makes clear that writing teachers have been purposefully enabling students to “guard against the sometimes-faulty logic behind statements you might hear from politicians, advertisers, and the like” for quite some time now (Greene and Lidinsky 2012, 219). As we teach fallacies, so, too, should we teach clichés: things we need to care about because of how easily they work us over. As long as we work *with* clichés

—and by extension failure—and as long as we act responsibly toward clichés, we will get somewhere more productive. Nothing ventured, nothing gained—right?

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←23 | 24→

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CHAPTER TWO

The Costs of Clarity

ALBA NEWMANN HOLMES AND KARA WITTMAN

> This is the "voice of ancient spring, sprouting from the earth, we are told," though because her song consists of "ee um fah um so" … it is not clear that the perception of time on this scale, in Woolf's radical version of intellectually disabled narrative, is even remotely intelligible to us.
>
> And there is so much that is unintelligible to us, is there not?
>
> —Michel Bérubé

i. *Several entrances.* We met at a conference for Writing Program Administrators in 2017. We found each other because, amid the discussions of assessment and feedback, revision and clarity, we both wanted to talk about cloudy, indefinite things: Yiyun Li's "blunder," Teju Cole's blind spot, Roland Barthes' "access by several entrances," anything by Emily Dickinson. What if instead of evaluating for the "correct" and the clear, we read our students' papers like literature? asks Min-Zahn Lu. What if we treat their writing with the sense of the "real" we afford literary texts, if we read them as we'd read the "idiosyncratic style of 'real' writers" (1994, 445)? We wanted—we want—to know this also. Not that every piece of student writing is a work of literature: drafts are drafts, and the humdrum can be merely the humdrum. Rather, we would like to think about what we might learn, what we might afford our students, by seeing a lack of clarity not as a failure but as an index of possibility, “a difference of which each text is the return” (Barthes 1974, 3).

ii. *Trail maintenance.* In the teaching of writing in American colleges and universities, Alba suggested at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in ←25 | 26→2017, “there is a lot of emphasis on cleaning things up—on trail maintenance, if you will—rather than on building or exploring a garden of forking paths. Which begs the question, what purposes do we think student writing serves? Why be clear? And what paths do we neglect by insisting always on the ‘clear’ one?” In the fall of 2018, Kara asked her students, “Why do you all, in your diversity, with your varied paths and voices and cognitive landscapes, have to be clear to *me*?”

iii. *Clarity*. “My students can’t write a clear sentence to save their lives” complains Joseph Teller in a 2016 “Advice” column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. We hear this from our colleagues also; it’s a common complaint. “There seems to be widespread agreement,” John Warner sums up in *Why They* Can’t *Write*, “that when it comes to the writing skills of college students, and even recent college graduates, we are in the midst of a crisis” (2018, 1). The crisis, Harold Evans confirms, is that we’re “foggy”—labyrinthine, vague, full of “garbage,” where we need more than anything, *right now*, to be clear (2017, 4–5). This demand for clarity in student writing seems a particularly Western hobbyhorse (Lunsford 2009, 143). Whether it emerges from an instrumental view of writing linked to business and technical contexts, from a long history of written communication standards and assessment in U.S. classrooms, from the super-ordinance of a rational/empirical method emerging from an Enlightenment epistemology that suggests all can be known and certain

(Adorno 1984), or from broader cultural leanings toward “plainspokenness,” students receive the message that in academic writing it is the writer’s job to work hard at being clear so that the reader does not have to work hard at deciphering meaning. Style guides, advice-givers, rubrics, and professors offer “clear” and “clarity” as keywords for the values we should all share as writers. “Unclear writing is a social problem,” declare Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup, and when we allow our students to persist in this pernicious unclarity, they “inflic[t]; it in turn on their readers and thereby sustai[n] a 450-year-old tradition of unreadable writing” (2017, 6).

iv. *The well-washed window.* As teachers, we recognize that writing serves many purposes within (and outside of) college courses. For each of these, we can imagine reasons why we and our colleagues might ask that our students’ writing be clear. Several in particular concern us here: (1) We ask that student writing be clear so that we may evaluate whether or not students have grasped the “content” of a course, assignment, or argument, what Jacqueline Rhodes calls the pedagogical “logic of mastery” (Waite 2017, 7); (2) We imagine that sloppy (that is, unclear) writing is the product of sloppy thinking, or worse that sloppy *minds* produce sloppy writing; and/or (3) We subscribe to the utilitarian view that clear writing is “efficient” and “productive,” necessary for success in the “real” world (Barnard 2014, 32). The first concern is linked to the notion of writing as a transparent medium—a crystalline lens through which the message is revealed. The second ←26 | 27→equates unclarity with error, lack of care, or a disregard for an audience that has needs, limitations, and preferences. The third, alive to the demands of the capitalist workplace, squares with “functional views of higher education” (35). These three ways of understanding clarity may be linked, as Richard Lanham suggests: “Good prose stands like a well-washed window giving unto the Kingdom of Thought” (Lanham 1977, 4).

As Lanham and Barnard demonstrate, the history of enjoining our students to be clear in their essay writing winds through decades of cultural, social, economic, aesthetic, and psychological anxieties and norms, “reiterated self-righteously … on campuses all over the United States” (Barnard 2014, 22). Of the 100 academic style guides Helen Sword surveys in *Stylish Academic Writing*, over 90% (the highest of any category surveyed) “allow,” “encourage,” or even demand “clarity, coherence, concision.” “Strive,” these guides say, “to produce sentences that are clear” (2012, 26). “Avoid excess” (see, e.g. the Purdue OWL “Sentence Clarity”).

The failure to be clear, the triumph of “words that confuse and mislead,” according to Evans, has implications beyond the classroom: Unclarity is responsible for the ongoing water crisis in Flint, Michigan, for Brexit, for predatory advertising and predatory lending, for *Citizens United*, and for our galling inertia on climate change (4–5). He may not be wrong. But what would it mean to be clear about these things? And what are we asking from our students when we make this demand of them?

v. *Failure*. In June 1968, Joan Didion experienced an attack of vertigo and nausea. Her subsequent psychiatric report offers this: “In her view, she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure.” Didion’s response? “By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968” (1979/2009, 15).

Perhaps difficulty and confusion are not inappropriate responses to the illogic and bad faith of our cultural moment, and unresolved ambiguity is not an inappropriate response to stark lines of antagonism and bias. Perhaps disorienting unclarity allows that something that seemed clear might be wrong. Perhaps clarity has failed our students.

vi. *To be clear*. We recognize the urgency of precise, unambiguous declarations and mandates that allow us to act, and swiftly, to make the climate habitable and safe for human and animal life, to reduce the glut of interested money and corrupt actors in our political system, to protect the human lives that need protecting, and otherwise to commit ourselves to a socially just world. We also want, with our students, to recognize these issues as vertiginous, nauseating, and anything but clear. As such, we'd like to look closely at what the metaphor "clarity" allows and what it excludes or distorts, at the thinking and experiences for which the metaphor ←27 | 28→cannot be a sufficient vehicle. Here we follow Barnard in our desire to examine the "unreflective insistence on clarity in student writing," the ways in which "the notion of clarity is an obfuscation" (2014, 4; 30). We need "to ask what kinds of ideas (and what kinds of writing) are being resisted in the name of clarity … what values and institutions are being privileged" (30). In our current widespread usage, clarity masks its own ideological baggage and its status as a limited and imperfect metaphor. Writing is never *only* clear. Clarity is not a universal value, nor is it monolithic. Instead, clarity is a metaphor for something like transparency onto meaning, dematerialized writing, the absence of contravening positions, the absence of doubt or difference.

As such, clarity operates out of an exclusionary logic: "To write 'clearly,' one must incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify" (Minh-Ha 2009, 17). To demand this clarity *tout court* is to accept that exclusionary logic. Clarity might also mean decisiveness, or readability, or ease, or efficiency, or familiarity, or might simply describe the way it makes a reader *feel*. Unreflective, un-situated use of the term obscures the value systems at work, further excluding that which is not easy, efficient, familiar, or does not feel good. We want to understand what and whom "clarity"—word and metaphor—fails. We consider what clarity, an ill-defined but ubiquitous presence in college writing rubrics, prompts, and style guides, might cost us and our students. We rethink the logic of a rigid opposition between clarity and the *failure* to be clear, seeing "failures" as instead potential indices of clarity's real limitations, the ways in which clarity fails to allow the full range of expression necessary for real, effective, inclusive communication.

vii. *Except that you* do *notice the glass*. It is not because clarity doesn't matter, it is not even because we don't like clarity that we press against it.

We do like and respect it. *And* we think there must be room for things edged out by the promise of invisible form. In her work on “unreadability” in writing, philosopher Sherri Irvin suggests that “apparently senseless [writing] … requires a willingness to consider it on its own terms, and to take seriously the possibility that it has a purpose that is defined by its idiosyncratic elements, including its refusal of conventional meaning. Reading in this way may not lead us to an articulable semantic meaning … but instead to an experience that has semantic, rhythmic, and non-cognitive elements” (2015, 106). What about the “experience of working through a sentence and finding it has committed [one] to half a dozen positions [one] doesn’t hold, literally because of the material density of language” (Haraway 2003, 109)? George Orwell claimed in 1946 that “Good prose is like a windowpane.” In “How to Write the Perfect Sentence,” Joe Moran invites us to “[p];icture an English window in 1946.… It would be smeared with grime from smoke and coal dust … the glass might still be cracked from air-raid gunfire or bombs.… An odd metaphor to use, then, for clear writing” (2018).

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If persuasion is the goal, do we imagine that only clarity is persuasive? What about arguments that rely on complexity, things “worth knowing in a very difficult way” (Dyson 2003, 78)? According to Scott Consigny, writers notorious for their difficult texts, like Martin Heidegger or James Joyce, produce such texts because their ideas are too dense to be “reduced” to mere clarity (1987, 414). The premise here is that complex thinking deserves complex articulation. We, too, think that careful and precise adherence to and representation of the complexities of thought is important. The works of Judith Butler or Fred Moten, for instance, include writing that is not completely self-evident, not completely clear because, as Moten explains, “the point is the blur itself” (2017, 244).

A problem arises when this performance of thinking becomes an act of gatekeeping. Is the assumption that if the student has not yet mastered clarity, then they are not entitled to be unclear? Have Heidegger, Joyce, Butler (2003) or Moten somehow earned the right to their own language (and thinking) in ways that our students have not? Who has the right to write in a way that others find difficult to access? Who has a right to fail to be clear?

Theodor Adorno has it this way: “A writer will find the more precisely, conscientiously, appropriately he expresses himself, the more obscure the literary result is thought, whereas a loose and irresponsible formulation is rewarded with certain understanding” (2005, 101). In other words, precision, conscientiousness, and appropriateness might *not* be clear when we allow the reader to adjudicate clarity according only to how she feels after she reads it, as Williams and Bizup put it (28). Commonplaces seem clear not because they are true (precise, conscientious, appropriate), but because they *feel* clear. The glass of the ambiguous essay might not look clear, but it might also accurately represent the complexity or the negative space that will allow hard, rigorous thinking to continue. Bruce Horner urges us to “trea[t]; ambiguous writing not simply as muddy but as potentially meaningful if and when sufficient reflection is given to its possible meanings” (2016, 112). In his analysis of our response to cultural and linguistic difference, avoiding ambiguity and privileging “efficiency” runs against our academic “habitus,” the intellectual and pedagogical commitment we’ve made as scholars and teachers to “respon[d] to difficulty, difference, and ambiguity with tolerance, patience, and humility,” and with “effort” (120). Irvin echoes Horner’s sense of intellectual responsibility: “The appearance of alienness is often the product of gulfs of identity and experience that we have the duty to bridge” (89). For these authors, blanket neoliberal demands for the efficiencies of clarity suggest we’ve abdicated our responsibility and failed our students.

In naming this failure, Horner, Irvin, and the others enjoin us as teachers to consider carefully what we must weigh and attend to when we read. “Say my goal is a liberatory goal,” says Gloria Anzaldúa, “it’s to create possibilities for people, to ←29 | 30→look at things in a different way so that they can act in their daily lives in a different way.… But then I have to weigh things: okay, if I write in this style, and I code-switch too much and I go into Spanglish too much and I do an associative kind of logical progression in a composition, am I going to lose those people I want to affect, to change?" (2003, 19). Anzaldúa can perhaps do this balancing herself (an ability she acknowledges requires hard-won and still-qualified privilege) but in our classrooms, we hold the scales.

viii. *The reader's job.* When we press against clarity, we press against our fear that our students will fail to be understood in the world because they have not articulated themselves in ways that their readers will allow. We might likewise activate this fear in them. This is a real concern. But it is not the only concern. We might equally well consider challenging the world of readers that has those expectations, that reads in those ways, that wants only the executive summary because they are executives, ready to execute. The more pressure we put on student writing to be clear, to display "clarity," the less their writing resembles the kinds of reading (and thinking) we hope they will be able to tackle in our classes or in their lives. And the less practice they will have with tolerating uncertainty in their own ideas, statements, syntax, as in that of others. We can place the blame on high-stakes testing for these defaults or deficits, but when students arrive in college, we may do little to re-introduce positive notions of complexity, ambiguity, and the labor of understanding as integral to the crafting of writing and the reading of others' texts.

We may also undervalue or misrecognize reading (and writing) habits not formed in the crucibles of U.S. notions of clarity. Alba recalls a student who had been raised between China and Italy asking with some incredulity: "But if I put my argument into the beginning of the document, won't that be terribly boring for you to read? Wouldn't you rather discover what I am arguing throughout the paper as you read it?"

In the teacher-preparation video produced at Oregon State, *Writing Across Borders*, a Japanese student, Maho, says this:

> American writing it is very important for you to make everything very clear, but in Japanese writing this is a bit different because readers are supposed to participate the story much more than American writing. It means that, for example, that in Japanese writing there are so many

> pronouns … but this is the reader’s job to understand what this *he* is and what this *she* is and what this *it* refers to. I tend to do that in American writing, in English essays, and everyone asks me who this he is and who this she is—I don’t understand. But for me, guess what? This is your job to understand it. But this is a really different part. In American writing, writers have a lot of responsibility for their writing, but in Japanese writing, readers have more responsibility to understand and participate in the story.

We can appreciate Maho’s comments through the lens of cultural competency: recognizing that the “American way to write is not the only way,” as Deema Al-Qaissi, a later interviewee within the video, notes. In fact, Maho’s account lays bare ←30 | 31→expectations of American academic writing that are doubly problematic, both because instructors may be unwilling to bridge “gulfs of identity and experience” to engage with writers who have been educated outside of normative strictures of American academese and because they may produce readers who prefer the writer do all the work for them, rather than preparing them for “the ambiguity and discomfort that accompany genuine inquiry” (Stenberg 2015, 46). These are costs of clarity.

ix. *Gap gardening.* In the margins of students’ papers: “I don’t understand how you got here.” “There seems to be a gap in the logic you present.” “Is there a reason that this example follows the previous?” In her interview, Maho also speaks about the intolerance for non-sequitur in American academic writing, and yet, she describes how it is an integral aspect of Japanese essay writing—creating a space in which the writer obligates the reader to imagine, anticipate, and finally participate in the connections the writer is making. Listening to Maho means not only making room for Japanese ways of writing but seriously considering the affordances of paratactic writing, of texts that jump around (as the traditional Japanese essays do), texts with gaps. We have also had champions of these forms within English, as Jonathan Monroe explains, “[T];he eventfulness of texts of whatever genre is all in the gap” (2009, 99).

Rather than having a predetermined notion of “flow” and reading for disruptions of clarity, we might grant these jumps and gaps the same consideration that we do the breaks in poems. In part, the making/poesis activated in poems is the meaning we make from the spaces they offer us: “empty, in-between spaces reveal and make possible a participatory opening where the coming community remains unmade, in the making, in all its potentialities” (100). The poet Rosemarie Waldrop calls this “gap gardening” (2005, 262).

What is lost when we hold student writing so far apart from poesis? “This demand [that the writer “show explicitly all of the steps that have led him to his conclusion”] not only invokes the liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought and so inhibits their objectively appropriate expression,” says Adorno in *Minima Moralia’s* “Gaps,” “but is also wrong in itself as a principle of representation … [K];nowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short, through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience” (2005, 80).

x. *In fact, that isn’t even a window.* Many of the style guides that offer advice about clarity emphasize that one’s primary question as she composes should be “Will my reader understand what I am saying?” (Harris 2018, 56; see also Williams and Bizup 2017; Lunsford 2009). The figure of clarity offers these guides a way to make us believe in immaterial language, completed thoughts, decisiveness, and easy transaction: looking through a window isn’t very hard.

←31 | 32→

Understanding that what you *think* you see behind the pane of glass might not actually be *what* you see, however, is hard. “We feel we know the answers,” writes Judith Butler,

> We know what family is, we know what desire is, we know what a human subject is, we know what speech is, we know what is comprehensible, we know its limits. And I think this

> feeling of certainty leads to a terrible parochialism. Taking for granted one's own linguistic horizon as the ultimate linguistic horizon … keeps us from being open to radical difference and from undergoing the discomfort and the anxiety of realizing that the scheme of intelligibility on which we rely fundamentally is not adequate (2003, 52).

Her suspicion of parochial clarity echoes Michael Bérubé's suspicion of the stock-and-trade "reliable/unreliable" binary, "as though 'reliable' itself is a single thing to be, a single kind of normative transparency or relationality" (2016, 175). In other words, the glass in that window? Not so clear. What you're telling me you see behind it? Even less.

xi. *Clarity in other dimensions*. In his study of intellectual disability and narrative, Bérubé makes a similar observation about the limited dimensions of narrative time. The "real problem" in understanding Benjy Compson's mental events in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, he writes, "is that Benjy Compson has a sense of time that does not make sense to us.… His narrative is not incoherent, it is not unintelligible.… But his narrative itself is disabled …: some of the ordinary functions of narrative are here inoperative" (75). For Bérubé, what Benjy's "fictional intellectual disability" can show us is how much our sense of human-created narrative relies on our (equally) human-created sense of time, and thus reveals the interrelated limitations—and potential stigmatizations—of both (75–83). In other words, Benjy's narrative "failures" reflect back our bias for the neurotypical, our failure to read and engage the full range of neurodiversity.

Ivan, a third-grader, works best in images. His learning difference causes him to struggle with writing; he "prefers working with pictures rather than words" (Armstrong 2012, 21). Observing that some of the Common Core standards for K-12 students "may present substantial obstacles to students with disabilities," learning and cognition specialists at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) offer modifications to reduce neurotypical bias (24). For example, they find the directive "write" unnecessarily limiting, and suggest it be replaced with "express" (24). Psychologist Beverley Steffert's research with dyslexic and other neurodivergent individuals reveals that "there does seem to be a tradeoff between being able to see the world in this wonderfully vivid and three-dimensional way, and an inability to cope with the written word either through reading or writing" (31). The compressed dimensions of written communication effectively distort the ability of these individuals to be clear; the communication might be read as foreshortened or flattened until expressed in dimensions more expansive than the lexical—given volume, or mass, or distance. What those of us with neurotypical or ←32 | 33→neurotypically biased expectations for clarity read as failure is in fact a representation of multidimensional, neurodiverse human communication and perception.

xii. *Partial effects.* The intellectual tradition of the essay offers us an alternative to the figure of windowpane clarity, one more interested in the force and beauty of not-knowing, of wandering, and of chaos. Following this tradition requires us to opt out of adjudicating clarity and instead to sit back and watch this "literary machine" (Deleuze in Bensmaïa 1987, 5) produce things not intended for us. Even consummate essayists like Montaigne or Woolf will be misunderstood, or understood only partially, if the reader "expects the essayist to affirm from the first the unity in origin of the essay's pre-existent and self-evident contents—in short, to settle matters once and for all" (Bensmaïa 1987, 10). It is dangerous for the reader to generalize the "*partial effects*" she is experiencing and take them as the essay's own lack or unclarity (10). We may make assumptions about why a student's text is "hard to follow," but it's risky to do so because the sources of unclarity may be many: deliberate, culturally inscribed, products of other ways of seeing or thinking. And the effects can be similarly diverse.

Catherine Prendergast's assertion about the effects of cross-languaging seems relevant to other forms of incomprehension as well: "Though the current political climate may strive to convince us otherwise, incomprehension is not simply lack, the absence of comprehension. Incomprehension is generative—of longing, of effort, of meaning" (2010, 234). In fact, the partial—desire turned inward, incompleteness, a raggededged mess—is the point of writing that seeks a purpose beyond the straightforward delivery of information, beyond the technical manual, that seeks to keep possibilities open, to linger in our own uncertainties.

Emily Ogden (2018) acknowledges how problematic “unknowing” may feel in our current moment—how willful ignorance has become a political stance at the same time uncertainty is read as a lack of necessary conviction. Still, she reminds us of the affordances of uncertainty, of not knowing: “Sometimes we put on unknowing as a gracious style, in order to leave space for other people’s necessary illusions.… Sometimes we keep ourselves in the dark to make impartiality possible, as in various forms of blind testing and blind judgment. Sometimes our unreadiness to speak now is the price to be paid for our worthwhile work in the future.” Sometimes, in other words, unclarity affords us exactly what we need.

xiii. *The garden of forking paths*. In Jorge Luis Borges’s short story, “El Jardín de Senderos que Se Bifurcan” or “The Garden of Forking Paths,” a scholar spends a lifetime trying to decipher a “contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts” left by a deceased novelist (1944). The same novelist is reputed to have designed a fabulous labyrinth, but the maze has never been located. In time, the scholar realizes that the text itself is the labyrinth—that its forking paths are temporal, rather than spatial. In it, the writer and reader are granted unprecedented agency to chart their own course. What happens when we ←33 | 34→observe that in each stage of a neurodiverse student’s composing process—from the meta to the minute—she experiences the same irresolution: “I could respond to this prompt or that one; I could frame my thesis statement this way, or that way; I could use this word, or I could use that …”? One strategy is to see the proliferation of possibilities as an impediment, then to help her shear away those possibilities, in hopes of avoiding the “contradictory jumble.” That is practical: We help her channel the course of their thinking, get work turned in, graduate on time. And yet, the conceptual scissors with which we do the trimming are also the tools of assimilation.

In order to cultivate what Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson et al. describe as "writing curriculum and pedagogies that are inclusive and supple enough to accommodate many kinds of differently embodied learners," we should consider what we are teaching this student about the proliferative potentials of her ways of thinking and composing. What if we subordinated clarity, or completeness, or logical flow and emphasized instead the space of the text as the space of interaction between the writer's own materials and between the text and the reader? Yes, we want students to be able to use "the languages of wider communication" (Lewiecki-Wilson et al. 2008, 320), but the scholar's discovery in Borges's story is that the text is doing something else, is already performing in some unexpected capacity.

xiv. *The house of possibility*

I dwell in Possibility—

A fairer House than Prose

—Emily Dickinson

To essay, when one is not limned in by the figure of clarity, is "to try, to probe new wordings to live with, new possibilities of being … [I];ts science is that of the artist, who experiments, combines searches, imagines, builds, criticizes what he wants to say *before knowing it*" (Zaid 2012, 121). "The essayist," not pretending "like a philosopher to offer a systematic understanding of the world" can "offe[r] a strange bridge between the world of images and that of concepts" (Picón-Salas 2012, 75).

As we write this, moving along the forking paths and out onto those strange bridges, we are studying the spaces our words and our students' words are allowed to inhabit—spaces on the page, the gaps that allow knowledge and ideas their negative spaces, spaces in the writer's and reader's mind. We are thinking about what we do when we ask students to write and then deem their writing readable or otherwise. We are thinking about the essay, the uncertain *try*, about forms of knowing that we may not yet be able to name, or that may shy away from the bright lights of institutional norms and dominant values. The limited and ideological metaphor “clarity” can be deadening, can eclipse our ability to see what is effective and necessary about acts of communication not usefully described as ←34 | 35→*clear*. And we are confident that there are more ways than one to make thoughts, insights, experiences, questions, and even answers, known.

We want, in other words, to help our students (and to permit ourselves) to dwell not only in the sometimes-unavoidable shelters of the *is*—structures of power and access that we would be abdicating responsibility to deny—but also in the house of the possible. “I do know,” writes Stacey Waite in *Teaching Queer*, “that there is always something different about a classroom in which there is a queer body, a queer sensibility” (2017, 13). That difference, for Waite, is partly that difficult, unfamiliar, experimental, radical texts are reimagined in terms of possibility, of feeling beyond what we’ve been told we *should* feel as we read. “This narrative,” Waite continues, “is about trying to make Butler *possible*—not accessible, or easy, or even pleasurable, but possible. There is much at stake in recognizing her possibility because if she is *impossible*, I also am impossible. Johnnie is impossible. Queer pedagogies, impossible.… I do, after all, agree with Butler that possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread” (12).

The philosopher John D. Caputo asks, “If something is unambiguously clear, transparently simple, is that not because its substance is spent, its future is over?” (2005, 15). More than anything, we want to encourage our students, in their writing and thinking and interacting, to allow that the future is not over, nor it is clear. Clarity fails us, fails our students, when it forces dense, messy thoughts, multidimensional ways of knowing, complicated and diverse minds and bodies, and protean, newly born ideas to conform to a culturally and ideologically specific logic of ease, order, and efficiency. We don’t need our students to imagine they must always be clear; we want them to imagine what is possible—and that they are possible.

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←37 | 38→

CHAPTER THREE

After the Accusation: The Lasting Impact of Plagiarism Trauma on Student Writing Behaviors

KATE PANTELIDES

> I guess the biggest part of it was that my integrity was put in check … nothing about it was intentional … nothing about it was bad but it took what was good … away from me.
>
> —Steve, describing plagiarism accusation

Both Diana and I were new to the university in 2015. She had just transferred from a community college, and I had migrated south for a position close to family. She was a great student: lots of insightful contributions during class, interesting writing, perfect attendance, and thoughtful treatment of her peers. That's why I was surprised when, toward the end of the semester, she missed a few classes and seemed visibly upset when she did come to class. After class one day I asked if everything was okay, and she mumbled something about difficulty she was having with a professor. Then the semester ended, she earned an A, and I didn't see her again at the university.

Two years later I ran into Diana working at a public library. I walked up to her, excited, saying that I was sad to not have seen her around campus. She glanced sideways, seemingly ashamed, lowered her voice, and explained that she had dropped out after that one semester. She had been accused of plagiarism, so she failed that class, lost her scholarship, and left. I was stunned. I asked if she had spoken to an advisor about what happened, and she said no—she didn't really know anyone at the university, and she didn't understand why she had been accused of plagiarism. I gave her my card, but I could tell that I wouldn't hear from her. She felt like she had failed, and she didn't want a reminder.

Sometimes failure can demonstrate grit (Duckworth 2016) or resilience (Stenberg and Minter 2018; Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady 2012), but more often failure acts ←39 | 40→ as a prescription for students who aren't expected to succeed at the university. In academia, plagiarism is widely perceived as the ultimate failure. There is an implicit expectation that "bad" students plagiarize, and thus, it's appropriate that they fail. But often, as in Diana's case, it becomes clear that the power of labeling something plagiarism is simply that it marks a student as a failure. It's not curative. It doesn't teach a student a (valuable) lesson about writing. It just becomes a trauma. By criminalizing plagiarism, the effect of our current orbit of plagiarism paranoia (Zwagerman 2008; Price 2002; Lyon 2009; Cadle 2010), we punish student behaviors that we actually claim to value—pro-social strategies, taking risks, working in team environments, and sharing ideas with others (Anders 2017; Vie 2013). Further, strict policies frequently confuse plagiarism with intertextuality and the processes of writing that research demonstrates are central to writing development (Baruchson-Arbib and Yaari 2004; Howard 2007; Howard and Watson 2010). Most importantly, plagiarism accusations, often viewed as benign in and of themselves, have lasting impact on how students see themselves and how they approach the learning process.

I use two case studies of students who have plagiarized to examine academic failure's relationship to students' personal embrace of failure, to their belief in themselves as failures. Allison Carr (2013) describes this phenomenon, in which someone begins to inhabit her own failure as follows: "The infinitive form, to fail—this is one thing. This is an action directed outward. To be a failure, on the other hand—to take on the noun form, the "thingness" which names one's identity—this is something else entirely." For the students in my study, the trauma they experience as a result of plagiarism accusations against them results in a closing down, a walling off of parts of themselves they had valued before the accusation. Their reactions help us resee plagiarism accusations, not as benign, but as the starting point of significant shame that runs counter to pedagogical goals in writing studies. Plagiarism accusations can lead to identity trauma in which students are forced to reckon with a vision of themselves that they don't recognize, and this revisioning of their identity has long-term impact on their affective sense of self and their relationships within academia.

PLAGIARISM: RISKY BUSINESS IN WRITING STUDIES

There is a tendency to think that behaviors that fall under the plagiarism umbrella are a product of the digital age, particularly given the rising tide of crisis language about the internet and the access it provides to texts ripe for stealing. Our contemporary concerns about plagiarism are amplified because of economic understandings of intellectual property (Howard 2007; Spigelman 1998) and the business model of higher education (Scott 2016). Also useful to take into account is Richard ←40 | 41→Braddock's opening to his 1957 article about plagiarism. He articulates the sinking feeling faculty might feel as they realize they have found a "border-line" text, one "devoid of the student's contribution except for his efforts with scissors and glue" (247). His description suggests the ubiquitous nature of plagiarism in the pre-internet age, adopting the criminal language that has come to characterize plagiarism discourse, but ultimately suggesting that the specter of potential plagiarism "is worse for the student than for the instructor.… The accused is afraid to speak for fear an offhand remark will drop him into the hands of the prosecutor. The student is often afraid to write for fear he will be wrong and bring down the red pencil which has hovered over his words" (247). This anxiety—that the instructor/prosecutor is poised over student compositions ready to sniff out plagiarism—characterizes the experiences of the students whom I interviewed where "shame [is] deployed as a tool of self-surveillance" (Carr 2013).

The affective component of plagiarism discourse is especially noteworthy and seems to drive curricular and policy decisions at many universities. Sean Zwagerman (2008) details a particularly troubling example of how both students and faculty are implicated in plagiarism accusations:

> Having caught a student plagiarizing early in the semester, a professor had lobbied successfully with the dean for authority to expel the student from the course.… The professor feared that the student, if allowed to stay, would seek revenge by writing a negative course evaluation. This struck me as the perfect metonym for the academic context, within which anger, anxiety, and the personalizing of systemic, institutional behaviors converge to motivate students to cheat and professors to zealously pursue them: a context of pervasive evaluation and ranking. (684)

The culture of assessment pits students and faculty against each other and problematizes learning and understanding discourse community conventions. There is not much room for risk-taking or mistakes.

In the last twenty years—since the advent of widely available plagiarism detection software—there has been attention to how digital writing practices and remix culture are frequently coded as plagiarism, and widespread adoption of plagiarism detection software has criminalized and made risky behaviors our field and the broader "real-world" of employers actually value. Yet, many faculty bow to the "siren song of efficiency" (Vie 2013, 4) and the potential control over students' "boundless access to text"

(Howard 2007, 7) that Turnitin allows. Thus, faculty turn to Turnitin as a sort of

> ethical drug test to which all participants are subjected. Whether guilty or innocent under prevailing ethical codes and textual ownership laws, writers who undergo the test see their writing produced in particular ways by the Turnitin.com remediation machine. In submitting their papers, writers submit to the color-coded reconstruction of their texts and, more profoundly, their identities as writers, insofar as the originality report frames every ←41 | 42→submission in terms of its program-driven assessment of similarity.… This production is an authoring: what comes in is something received, what comes out is a product. (Marsh 2004, 434)

Students learn to see their own writing as a potentially plagiarized product, and the submission of their work to the ever-expanding database makes the Turnitin machine an even stronger product for universities to purchase. Students whom I interviewed also seem to have accepted Turnitin as an objective reader of their work, often waiting to see “if the software says” they have plagiarized.

Within the rich body of plagiarism research, less attention has been paid to student experiences of plagiarism and student perceptions of accusations, though Kelly Ritter (2005) and Kathryn Valentine (2006) provide a window into such experiences. Ritter (2005) draws on student analyses of online paper mill sites to identify why they are appealing to students. She suggests that students don’t see themselves as authors—as we invite them to in our classrooms, but as “consumers.” Such analysis helps us recognize that buying an online paper, what many write off as obvious plagiarism, as opposed to more complex types of plagiarism, like patchwriting and lack of citation, can be similarly nuanced.

Valentine (2006) provides significant detail into a student experience of a plagiarism accusation from the perspective of the writing center. Valentine had worked extensively with an international graduate student, Lin, describing him as a highly motivated, committed student. When he was accused of plagiarism both he and she were surprised. Her article details Lin’s confusion over the accusation as a result of his lack of experience with American university conventions. She posits, “if we only understand students who plagiarize unintentionally through an ethical discourse about plagiarism, we can only understand them as dishonest … [S];tudent identities are read off of textual features, using mainstream values and understandings” (95). This experience was confounding for Lin who considered himself an honest student, one with significant integrity who would never take a shortcut. Ultimately Lin was left with a view of plagiarism that is antithetical to what we hope students will take away from our classes: that convention is fickle and arbitrary. Unfortunately, many students, both domestic and international, feel this way. My study picks up where Valentine’s leaves off, offering student case studies that detail not only plagiarism accusations themselves, but also the lasting impact of such accusations on students’ approach to the university and their understanding of themselves as learners.

THE STUDY

Inspired by my student Diana, and my interest in better understanding the long-term effects of plagiarism accusations, the findings addressed in this article derive ←42 | 43→from a larger study examining student and faculty experiences with plagiarism. In seeking university approval for my study, my Institutional Review Board “required” that I receive verbal consent from participants rather than asking them to sign participation forms because of the “sensitive” nature of plagiarism. This insistence on the part of my IRB office effectively underscored the significance of the stigma attached to plagiarism. Steve, a student veteran accused of plagiarism, told me that he would actually like to sign the form, because he considered it a matter of integrity. Even still, he agreed that plagiarism accusations are incredibly serious, underscoring this belief as follows: “I might as well get a dishonorable discharge from the air force in my mind they’re equivalent … and I think in society’s eyes they are.”

I selected two student case studies from my larger data corpus that specifically address the fear and trauma associated with plagiarism accusations. Each case study illustrates a positive student behavior that is ultimately nullified as a result of the plagiarism accusation and subsequent trauma. The two students react to the accusations differently, one growing suspicious of those around him, and one constantly second-guessing her instincts about writing. I've created pseudonyms for all participants and excluded any identifying details, but my use of pronouns reflects students' self-identified gender. I recruited participants via email, posted flyers in my academic building, and coordinated with the university office of academic integrity. I conducted interviews with participants that ranged between 15–120 minutes, and data collection is ongoing. I employed a six-question interview protocol, but ultimately the interviews were semi-structured; I elicited student and faculty narratives about their plagiarism experiences, and then I asked follow-up questions. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and I subsequently inductively coded them. My method of transcription includes detail of how the narrative was delivered, paying particular attention to pauses and emphasis, since my interest includes affect, which is communicated through these characteristics of speech. Quotes from the transcripts represent exactly what the student said; emphasized words are demonstrated through the use of bold; brackets and ellipses signify edited breaks in the narrative; and parentheses are used to represent pauses, either timed, as in (.3), or three seconds, or (.), as in a brief, untimed pause.

Although case studies do not provide generalizable data, they offer rich detail that helps us fill in the missing gaps in the body of research regarding plagiarism. The case studies provide the untold story of students' plagiarism after-life, experiences that have far-reaching implications for faculty across the disciplines. Particularly when layered with the rich data we have about plagiarism throughout the field of writing studies, these narratives offer new understanding of how we might reframe our perceptions of plagiarism accusations and their impact as an arbiter of failure.

←43 | 44→

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Both of the students whose plagiarism accusations I address in detail here are incredibly conscientious. Steve is a military veteran who prided himself on his teaching abilities while in the service, and Jenna is a high achieving lower-division student who has earned her place in an honors program and who, prior to her plagiarism accusation, used collaborative writing to deepen her understanding of course material.

Steve’s Story

Steve was the first person who volunteered to talk to me about his plagiarism accusation; he was eager to tell his story. The incident had taken place more than a year prior in a math course. After realizing that a number of his peers were struggling in the course, he organized a study group and used the teaching skills he had honed in the military. With pride, Steve recalled how the students in his study group all passed the course and started earning As, Bs, and Cs on exams they had previously failed. For his part, Steve had a 4.0 and regularly participated in class, but the study group was helpful for him to work through the course ideas and to teach, an opportunity he valued and hadn’t had since retiring from the military. Steve and the members of his study group were accused of copying each other’s homework since they ended up with one of the same wrong answers on a problem.

The instructor began class one afternoon by explaining that a group of students had plagiarized and that they would receive a zero on that homework opportunity in addition to further semester grade penalties. Instinctively knowing that they were the guilty party, after class Steve and the students in his study group approached the faculty member and explained their process. Steve even facilitated a mock problem for the professor to show her how they worked together, collaboratively writing up on the board, talking through options, and then checking to see if they had gotten the same answer after doing the work. Steve also asked to meet with the instructor later during her office hours to explain what had happened. Ultimately she agreed that the mistake was accidental, a simple math error that everyone had repeated since they had shared the same process, but Steve couldn't shake his devastation: "I felt like (.) you know (.3) I felt *upset* (.) I mean here I am (.) retired military (.) honorable career (.) I mean […] integrity is a big thing for me (.) and I felt like (.) *man* I'm doing something good here and trying to help these students."

Labeling their behavior as plagiarism had significant impact on Steve, even though he didn't suffer any grade or disciplinary penalties. After the accusation, the study group mostly disbanded, and Steve stopped participating in study groups for other courses. Steve says that he "personally didn't want to do it any more." ←44 | 45→Working with other students started to feel like too big a risk, and he began to question himself: "Here I am trying to help but I'm like what's the *point*? I don't get paid for doing this (.) I mean I like to help (.) it's part of my nature […] [but] here I am (.) getting questioned about my integrity." Although active participation had been a hallmark of Steve's work in the class, his "motivation" to "volunteer" or "raise [his] hand" disappeared, and it was an effort to attend class. Working with a "team" of students, which he likened to "troops" whom he didn't want to leave behind, had been focal to his engagement with the class. Perhaps most problematically, Steve describes how his tendency to help, to work with others who were struggling, was so ingrained, it was "hard to break … but after all that I did (.) I shut all that down … it's not worth me getting in trouble if it's perceived the wrong way." This last observation, that plagiarism is all about "perception," was Steve's primary takeaway from the experience. He sees plagiarism as somewhat arbitrary and subject to instructor caprice.

Jenna's Story

Jenna was accused of plagiarism in her first semester when, as she notes, "everything was stressful anyway." After requesting specific permission at the beginning of the semester to turn in the same lab reports, she and her lab partner collaborated on their writing throughout the course. Since they were tasked with performing the experiments together, it made sense to them that they would write up the work together, although Jenna soon noticed that her classmates were not using the same practice. Towards the end of the semester, their professor accused them of plagiarism. Both Jenna and her lab partner had a prestigious scholarship, and the professor told them that they would receive zeroes on all the assignments, fail the class, and be reported to the board of the scholarship committee.

After meeting with her professor on numerous occasions to explain the misunderstanding and writing him a detailed letter, he apologized. During office hours he told her, “You’re either stupid enough to think that you could get away with this [.]; or I must have said that (.) and I *don’t* think you’re stupid (.) so I must have said that … we can make a secret handshake as an apology.” Although this sounds rather callous, given how much the experience upset Jenna, he did give her the benefit of the doubt, and Jenna really appreciated the professor—that was part of why the experience was so upsetting. She recalls how she felt when her lab partner called to tell her about the accusation: “My stomach was just in knots like my heart dropped and I just felt so guilty and I felt like I *had* done something wrong (.) … like I had you know (.2) done this *horrible* thing that I’ve heard criminalized like my whole life as being applied to me and I was like *no* (.) like I’m not that person.” Jenna experiences a sort of cognitive dissonance as a result of the accusation, struggling to reconcile her expectation of someone ←45 | 46→who is a plagiarist, someone who is a failure, with her own identity as a successful, conscientious student.

LATER IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACCUSATION

Although both Steve and Jenna describe being significantly traumatized by their plagiarism accusations at the time, Steve even going so far as to seriously consider dropping out (“I’m like (.) *screw* it”), the subsequent implications of these accusations are perhaps more troubling. In particular, Steve describes his reaction as the following: “It impacted me emotionally (.) it threw me off track (.) but not just for that class (.) it really threw me off track in my other classes… Cause I just wasn’t as focused as I was (.) I started becoming guarded.” Whereas previously Steve had worked with peers to improve their understanding and increase his own engagement with and enjoyment of the course and its content, he started thinking of students as competitors. He became more suspicious of other students and wondered if *they* were cheating. This is a major mentality change for a student who had demonstrated effective leadership and collaborative behaviors with peers.

Jenna was similarly accused of what her professor called “unauthorized collaboration,” prompting her to wonder, “what’s fully authorized collaboration?” In describing their process of unauthorized collaboration, Jenna details actively working with her partner to shape the document. They would sit and write together, actively discussing the experiment, ways to phrase things, and choices about arrangement. Jenna describes herself as someone who learns most effectively in this kind of situation. Certainly, these case studies point to the importance of effective assignment design. Students should see worth in their assignments. Collaborating on experiments and then writing separate lab reports did not make sense to Jenna when she benefited extensively from writing with the person with whom she had conducted the experiments. However, the most lasting impact of the accusation on Jenna was that, in her words, “it impacted … my sense of who I am because it was just a shock that someone would think that I would do that kind of thing intentionally.”

IMPACT ON WRITING BEHAVIORS

Although both Steve and Jenna were accused of plagiarism in STEM classrooms, the behaviors that have been most impacted more than a year later are their writing processes. Each month Steve pays for Grammarly, a software that integrates into a word processor to help him avoid “accidental” plagiarism, “just in case.” Despite my insistence that he doesn’t need to buy such a product, Steve holds that writing with ←46 | 47→Grammarly gives him peace of mind in advance of turning something in to Turnitin. And arguably, he is right to be worried. He has already been accused of plagiarism, and the faculty who participated in my study had vastly different definitions of plagiarism.

Steve recounts a time when he turned in an essay to his history professor, and Turnitin flagged that he had taken a phrase about posting to Facebook from a dog grooming site. After being “scared” about the results, he emailed his professor, who “laughed” and told him not to worry about it—she only worries when Turnitin offers reports of 60–70% copied material. Although the instructor’s assurance that he hadn’t plagiarized made him feel better in the short-term, Steve mused, “if she doesn’t [think it’s plagiarism] (.) will another instructor?” Were there not such significant implications, the finding that Steve and this dog grooming site used the same well-worn phrase might simply be an interesting demonstration of intertextuality, but instead it fueled Steve’s already significant anxiety about composing. Steve describes his broader concerns as follows:

> let’s say I wrote an essay a semester ago and you know how you … kind of write the *same* kind of stuff? Or you have your favorite words?… You know? So now let me go look at my *previous* essays (.) If I still have them (.) so I don’t get caught up in that (.) so now I’m *freaking* out where (.) what if I miss an older essay where (.) you know? Cause I do that (.) I notice even in my facebook texts (.) I’m like (.) man I say that a lot … so for example, if I use [one of those stock expressions or favorite words] in one essay and don’t remember it (.) and then use it in another (.) is that going to cause an issue?

Steve’s plagiarism paranoia demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how plagiarism detection software functions, how plagiarism functions, and how writing itself functions. It forwards the confusion between intertextuality and plagiarism, a nuance that gets lost in the culture of fear promoted by plagiarism detection software and a focus on students developing individual products to demonstrate understanding of content. The fears spurred by plagiarism prevention are more powerful than the writing instruction Steve has received, and my attempts to allay his fears by describing how Turnitin actually works were ineffective.

Like Steve, Jenna is similarly nervous about writing, but her concerns are self-directed and they are heightened when she works with other students. For instance, when Jenna and her roommate peer review their weekly journal entries for their politics course, she finds herself silently coaching: “I do catch myself in my brain be like OK make sure that you don’t accidentally like steal any lines (.) because your brain does that and it’s weird (.) you kind of just accidentally remember a certain phrasing and want to use that (.) and that’s definitely something that I’ve noticed more as I’ve been like extra careful to make sure not to like have there be any similarities.” Although Jenna is describing a natural reading process, she has already begun criminalizing the behavior in her mind. Further, she consciously prevents herself from making connections between she and ←47 | 48→her roommate’s ideas about the same classroom content: a missed opportunity to potentially enhance the conversation.

As the CCCC’s (2013) statement against plagiarism detection software suggests, for these two students, plagiarism accusations and the use of plagiarism detection services at my university have created “a hostile learning environment,” one that has “[constructed] ill-conceived notions of originality and writing; [disavowed] the complexities of writing in and with networked, digital technologies; and [treated] students as non-writers” (377). This hostile environment is particularly troubling because it is not conducive to risk-taking in student writing, my primary goal for students in writing courses. Sean Zwagerman (2008) goes so far as to suggest that universities have become “ideologically disabled from encouraging” risk as a result of plagiarism hysteria (687).

Although I am only able to describe Steve and Jenna’s experiences in detail here, they are certainly not alone in their fearful reactions. In their research on plagiarism paranoia, Dànielle Nicole DeVoss and Annette Rosetti (2002) recall an incident in which upon finding that three students had plagiarized, invited those students to office hours without naming the plagiarizers. When the instructor peeked out of her office, she “was shocked to see a line of students … waiting to see her. A total of 14 students visited her office. The three plagiarists were among the fourteen, but the remaining eleven students weren’t sure if they had plagiarized or not” (DeVoss and Rosetti, 2002, 192). Steve and Jenna’s shame and plagiarism trauma similarly motivates their defensive approaches to writing and collaboration. In an effort to avoid plagiarizing, they consciously avoid integration of ideas and collaborative behaviors that come naturally to them.

Because plagiarism accusations impact students and faculty broadly, not just the students and faculty who are directly accused or make accusations, the pedagogical implications of accusations are far-reaching. As faculty, our experiences with plagiarism bleed into our syllabi, our first-day of class introductions, our university policies, etc. And, as these two case studies demonstrate, these plagiarism accusations impacted Steve and Jenna’s behaviors across their courses, across semesters, and with both faculty and other students. In fact, Jenna describes the impact of the current tone of plagiarism policing on students as follows:

> It’s definitely discussed as like such a huge scary thing (.) like don’t dare plagiarize because you’re going to end up *homeless* or like under a *bridge*.… I don’t rarely if ever hear like (.) peers of mine talking about copying and pasting plagiarism because that’s like so *easy* to detect (.) and I think when plagiarism does occur it’s usually *unintentional* … it is criminalized so much to point where like (.) you find yourself like (.) kind of being scared to submit stuff to your professors or whatever.

This fear was the lasting impact for both Jenna and Steve. Granted, they did not buy papers nor directly copy a peer’s work without permission or attribution, ←48 | 49→but, by the standards of each class, they *did* plagiarize. Further, their instructors recanted their accusations, but that was just because they realized that their definitions of plagiarism had been too broad, that, in effect, they did not understand the implications of their policies.

These are two successful students who fought to be heard in their accusations. Both students spoke to their accusing faculty members multiple times and didn’t accept the accusations, even though they suffered long-lasting implications. My data doesn't help us understand how less successful or privileged students might react to such an accusation, but these case studies point to problematic implications. For instance, Diana, a first-generation college student who had transferred from a community college simply dropped out of school rather than respond to a plagiarism accusation. And yet these confident, successful students were so shaken, more than a year later, that their previous sense of self and approach to the classroom—active participation, collaboration, engaging with students around course material outside of class—was compromised.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Plagiarism accusations can lead to identity trauma in which students are forced to reckon with a vision of themselves that they don't recognize, that of a failure, and this revisioning of their identity and the attendant fear has long-term impact on their relationships. There is such fear associated with plagiarism. Faculty fear they will be duped. Students fear they will plagiarize accidentally or that someone else will plagiarize and get ahead unfairly. We fear that we will fail. This fear displaces the conversations we *should* have, about the importance of good research questions, about understanding critical conversations, about taking risks without the looming, ever-present fear of plagiarism. Certainly some students buy papers and knowingly pass off others' direct words as their own, but my findings, coupled with the extensive body of research on plagiarism in writing studies, suggest that we would do well to shift our attention to the majority of students who don't do this and who are penalized by this culture of fear.

These case studies offer a glimpse of the potential implications of plagiarism accusations, across the curriculum and across time. Even though Steve and Jenna plagiarized outside of the humanities, these accusations directly impacted their writing behaviors in subsequent semesters. Microanalysis does not offer us an understanding of "all students" or plagiarism writ large, but it does provide detailed, thorough illustrations of the implications of plagiarism accusations on individual students and the ubiquitous culture of plagiarism. These findings point to a radical recommendation: We should stop policing plagiarism. The fear associated with plagiarism prevents some students from doing the exact things we want ←49 | 50→them to do—collaborate, take risks, be leaders, test out new ideas and practices. By obsessing over plagiarism and insisting that activities that are not conducive to individual assessment be assessed individually, we tie ourselves in knots promoting all kinds of fictions about writing at the university. We should continue responding to behaviors that fall under the plagiarism umbrella—lack of attribution, patchwriting, etc.—but by decriminalizing such behaviors, and not labeling them plagiarism, we might more effectively help students learn discourse community conventions and ease the cat and mouse tensions between faculty and students that a focus on plagiarism brings.

Howard prophesied about the impact of plagiarism detection software and its attendant concerns in 2007, "The biggest threat posed by Internet plagiarism is the widespread hysteria that it precipitates … it will close off possibilities for actually teaching students how to read, synthesize, and write about sources" (Howard, 12–13). We shouldn't write our policies based on all of the ghosts of problem students past and thus close off opportunities for teaching and learning. How might we instead foster trust in our classrooms and a space to take risks? How might we de-criminalize the desirable tendency of students to make connections between their classes, collaborate with peers, and embrace the notion of "textual ownership [as] always irredeemably dialectical" (Spigelman, 1998, 251). Turnitin can't stop students from buying papers, and no empirical data has shown that this is a serious problem; it's certainly not a problem that Turnitin can solve. Let's instead shift our attention to engaging students in the risks and rewards of writing, take advantage of writing studies' rich research tradition to name the behaviors often identified as plagiarism, and work with them rather than against them.

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←50 | 51→

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←51 | 52→

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CHAPTER FOUR

Failure Potential: Using Failure as Feedback

DARCI L. THOUNE

The ultimate cliché of failure is a motivational poster encouraging readers not to be defined by their failures or, rather, to see their failures as opportunities for success. An honest poster would acknowledge that the ability to recover from failure is a privilege—that not all failures are equal. Yet, failure potential hangs thick in the air, especially in educational spaces. As educators, we balance the need to protect students from failure and to encourage them to fail (gently) as part of their thinking and learning development. At the same time, we wrestle with our own failures, past and present.

A child of the 80s, I have a distinct memory of classrooms filled with all kinds of posters—posters about Book It (I was in it for the pizza AND the reading), D.A.R.E. posters (thanks, Nancy Reagan), and, my favorite, *that* poster of the kitten desperately clinging to a tree branch

—with the caption, “Hang in There, Baby!” This poster appealed to me for two reasons: (1) kitten, and (2) as a military brat who attended nine schools in 12 years, I needed some encouragement to “hang in there.” The thing I didn’t understand at the time was that when cats fall, they almost always land on their feet. Humans, not so much. I have cat life goals.

This chapter takes up failure as a form of feedback and makes a case for professionally, personally, and pedagogically folding failure into our classrooms and workspaces. In the context of this chapter, “feedback” references the information ←53 | 54→you receive on a performance, activity, or action. It also references a range of interactions—the space(s) between writing drafts; the gaps and connections in communication between instructor and student; the quiet moments when instructors read student writing; the tense and pleasurable moments when students read comments from instructors. I mean the information we receive when we’re doing well and when we’re not. I mean the act of trying to help our students to return to their writing with fresh eyes and fresh hope and the subtle signals we receive from our students when we’re not reaching them. Feedback entails a reciprocal relationship. And, like all relationships, feedback is sometimes complicated. This is especially true when the feedback we receive tells us that we need to be and do better, that we didn’t get it right, that we need to make another attempt, that we failed. While failure could exist as an ending point, I’d like to argue instead that failure functions as a form of feedback, by which I mean that for students and instructors failure provides us with information at a crossroads in the writing process that will likely affect future writing practices and performances. And, like any feedback, students and instructors have choices in how to use it—we have choices about how we enter into a relationship with feedback. Engaging with failure as a form of feedback requires a kind of revisioning and reconceiving of how we think about failure and the role(s) it plays in the writing classroom.

It’s a fact that failure *feels* terrible. The degree of terrible depends on the kind of failure. For example, misspelling something on the board in front of my class is embarrassing (damn dyslexia) and a kind of failure, especially for an English professor. Being denied promotion is a whole other level of failure that I've also experienced and it felt much, much worse. And, the daily persistent feeling that I'm not very good at my job feels like a different kind of failure all together (*all* imposter syndrome *all* the time). These are also privileged forms of failure where the stakes are relatively low.

For composition scholars, the fact that feedback is a heavily situated activity (Straub 2000), that the notion of error is largely socially constructed (Anson 2000; Williams 1981), and that learning is an inherently socially negotiated activity (Vygotsky 1978) is well established in the literature, but these understandings don't quite get at the way feedback in any form is premised on failures of communication big and small. In fact, process pedagogy and the recursiveness it enacts is premised on the acknowledgment and anticipation of failure as part of how writing works.

Hardly anything fills me with a deeper or more profound sense of dread than facing the page. For weeks I've been avoiding this moment, but here we are. A deadline looms in the distance and sentences must be written. ←54 | 55→I sometimes feel like a liar when I advise my students to just keep practicing. Yet, the stakes for me are not exactly the stakes many of my students face. For many of my students—students who have cut their writer's teeth on MEL-Con (main idea, evidence, links, concluding statement), five paragraph essays, writing templates, and a Mad Libs approach to writing, there is only one chance to get this right and if they don't get it right, their failure feels absolute.

But, if we need students to fail in order to help them, then why have we created an educational environment that makes it so difficult for students to fail without *failing*? Why have we made it so difficult for ourselves and for students to enter into this relationship with failure as a form of feedback? Asao Inoue's work on failure and writing assessment helps to illuminate the complexities inherent in any discussion about how failure functions in the context of writing assessment. And feedback plays a direct role in the assessment process—it's the very means of communication between students and instructors. Working to understand the role that failure can play in the feedback process may help to contribute to Inoue's call to “consciously construct [failure] differently” (337). By this he means moving writing instructors beyond evaluating student work within the context of an evaluation system designed to fail students who do not adhere to Standardized Edited American Academic English. To conceive failure outside this inequitable system, Inoue argues, is productive and “is positive and signals the opportunity to learn, grow, and develop in purposeful ways” (346). Moreover, “productive failure” resists simply failing students according to standard educational norms such as grading; rather, productive failure “produces judgments, investigations, negotiations, and discussion among students and with the teacher about expectations, new drafts, and future practices” (346). These are the spaces where feedback resides—in negotiations and judgments between and among instructors and students.

To shed some light onto how we might accomplish the goal of reconceiving failure as feedback, I present data I gathered from interviews with writing instructors across the disciplines at my university and offer some tentative hypotheses related to how we might think about failure as feedback for students and instructors alike. When I began researching feedback on student writing, I was mostly curious about how instructors across my campus defined, perceived, and practiced feedback. Over the course of a semester in 2016, I conducted an IRB-approved study of three focus groups, interviewed seven instructors, and surveyed my colleagues across campus on their feedback habits, practices, preferences, and philosophies. Although there were several surprises during my data analysis—including the cruel things faculty had to say about student writing (maybe not so surprising)—what struck me most was the unanticipated connection between student failure and instructor feedback.

Let me tell you a little bit about my students. I teach at a four-year regional comprehensive university in the Midwest. Our school is a predominantly white institution with a fall 2018 enrollment of roughly 10,500 students (89% White, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and less than 1% African American). Our school is largely comprised of students who were in the top 25% of their graduating class. Our school is full of successful students who are about to fail for the first time and nobody is going to talk about it.

During the course of my study, it became clear to me that instructor feedback is entirely dependent upon instructor perceptions that students have failed in some part of the writing and learning process. The faculty I interviewed use feedback for a variety of purposes, including to professionalize students; to encourage students to become better writers; to correct students when they make errors; to mentor students; and to prevent plagiarism. And, while each of these instructors are deeply committed to their students, there are moments in this project that highlight the tension in the feedback relationship between instructors and students when, as Inoue points out, "Failure becomes messily intertwined with students' and teachers' conflicting ideological stances as much as with teachers' phenomenological reading practices that may presuppose error" (333).

Most of the instructors I interviewed discussed the amount of time it takes to provide students with feedback or their wish that their students better understood the work of feedback, which becomes a different kind of failure, one connected to systems within the academy which have become increasingly mechanized and transactional. Of all the interview questions I asked, the one that provoked the most unexpected responses was, "What do you wish your students knew about the feedback process?" Below are brief excerpts from the answers I received.

> I wish that [students] knew that [my feedback] wasn't necessarily a reflection on their writing skills, per se. That it is a process, and even the best writers go through an editing process. Writing is hard. Joseph Conrad said, "Writing is staring at a blank piece of paper until your forehead bleeds." That's a tough thing. —Sean, Political Science and Public Administration

> I just hope that they recognize that the feedback was meaningful, and that they know that it was purposeful and that it met the needs of what they were looking for. That's deep. I'm sorry. Because, I want to get to know [students]. I want to build relationships with them. Giving feedback is a way to do that, a really wonderful way to do that, but it is time consuming because there's many other aspects of what we do. —Greta, Health Education

I wish [students] had a better sense of how much time we spend on [feedback]. That’s the big one. When they’re starting to get a little snippy like, “Why isn’t our paper back yet?” I’m like, “Count your friends in the class, and let’s talk about how long you think it takes me to read these. If you spend one hour writing this, I’m spending almost as much time grading four of these.” The time investment would be something that’s important to me for them ←56 | 57→to understand, but that feels selfish, like, “I just want them to know how much I’m working on this.” —Ester, Psychology

[I wish they knew] that my opinion is not infallible. It comes back to that critical thinking. I wish they recognized more that they need to critically assess everything, all the time essentially. —Damien, Statistics

In my physics class, I would like them to look at [my feedback] and see, “Oh well, maybe I didn’t quite have the best understanding of this physics concept.”.… They probably look at, “Where did I miss points, why did I miss points, and do I feel like that was justified or not?” If not, they’ll come argue with me. But I think that they’re mostly focused on the grade that they get in the class.… I think they just think that [feedback] doesn’t take very long. They don’t really appreciate how much time it actually takes me to give good feedback. —Jane, Physics

I would love for [feedback] to be an active conversation rather than passive on their part where they’re saying, “What about this? What if I did this?” Some students absolutely do that, but some students take it all as negative that, “I didn’t do it right the first time. I failed.” I try hard to talk about, “You need to cultivate the opportunities for failure in a safe learning environment, because learning doesn’t occur in the absence of failure. It actually only occurs with failure.” I try really hard to have this conversation with my students that, “Just because you didn’t do it right the first time doesn’t mean you failed. It means that there’s room to learn something.” I try to have that conversation but maybe our system has trained them to think that all failure is bad, and that in our culture, we talk about losers and failures. —Maighread, Biology

I sometimes feel like they think that they’re not doing a good job when they get feedback. I think they somehow, in their minds, feel like there should be no markings on the paper whatsoever, and if there are markings, then somehow, they’re insufficient. It’s a bad thing. I

> would love for them to realize that that’s actually where the learning’s happening. In my mind, it’s a vulnerability. Here, I have laid out what I know. I get that you want it to be clean. You want it to be perfect, but it never is. It never is. If you hand this same work to ten different mathematicians, you’re going to get ten different sets of criticism. It’s all valuable, and it’s not reflective on you as a person. This is the process by which we learn. I keep trying to tell my students, even in my 100-level classes, you don’t learn unless you make a mistake. Unless you make a mistake, I can’t figure out what you know and what you don’t know. I can’t, then, help you with it. This feedback is part of being successful. You can get feedback and still be successful. You should want feedback. You shouldn’t want a clean piece of paper. Everybody’s writing can get better. There is not the ultimate writer, period, in any genre. I love it when I submit an article and I get feedback from it, constructive feedback from it, because it makes it that much better. It makes me that much better when I incorporate that into my writing. I don’t think they get that. You know what I mean? My students at least. — Richard, Mathematics

The above excerpts do not fully reflect the richness of the responses from each of these instructors, but I do think some patterns emerge.
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- *Instructors are anxious about the feedback process*. They’re anxious that students misinterpret their feedback, they’re anxious about what students do with their feedback, and they’re anxious (and a bit resentful) about the pressure to provide quality feedback quickly.
- *Instructors want and need students to fail*. More specifically, instructors need students to fail so that they can provide the kind of feedback that leads to learning (and “productive failure”), but this is difficult to accomplish in academic spaces and systems that don’t leave students with much room to fail. This is additionally complicated by living in a culture where failure is a risky option, especially because students are working within a rigid educational system that does not accommodate difference, and where failure is often a negative reflection of one’s value or worth as an individual.

- *What instructors wish their students knew about the feedback process is complex and complicated*. Elsewhere in the interviews, participants acknowledged the fact that there never seems to be enough time to cover content in classes let alone having more honest conversations about feedback and failure.

Not long after I conducted this research, I was asked to give a TEDx talk—the topic was entirely up to me. I was so taken with this connection between failure as a form of feedback that I gave my talk on just this subject. The title of the talk was, “Failure as Feedback: F*cking Up and Still Sort of Succeeding.” I figured if I was going to do this thing, I was going to do it in a way that honestly reflected my love of the “F word” and my debilitating imposter syndrome. It’s been twelve years since I completed my Ph.D. and I don’t think there’s a day that goes by that I don’t feel like an absolute fraud. I’m jealous of all of the professorial swagger I see around me—I’m desperate to feel confident about anything I’m saying and this was my moment to lay it all bare. My fear of failure has occupied more space and time in my life than I want to admit. And, here I was preparing to tell everyone about it. My talk began with an admission of several visible and public failures in my life, including the failure to take risks in my own educational process and the failure to live as loudly and as boldly as I might have otherwise done if I wasn’t so afraid of failing. Being honest about my fears and failings did not prevent me from continuing to fail, but what it did do is provide me with an opportunity to deeply connect with others who also sometimes feel like failures. Even now, almost three years later, I still have students, faculty, and community members approaching me to tell me about their failures. And, I’m grateful for this. Because there is a part of me that believes that if we could all be a bit braver and a bit more honest about our failures, then maybe failing wouldn’t be so stigmatized.

←58 | 59→

After considering the role of failure as a form of feedback for both students and teachers (myself included), I have a few practical suggestions for how we might continue to develop Allison Carr’s (2013) pedagogy of failure.

First, if learning is about failure, then why aren’t we teaching our students how to fail productively? I don’t mean how to blindly fail or to fail without accounting for the ways in which failures can be experienced differently depending on who is failing. And, I don’t mean to fail towards “success” either. Not every failure has the possibility of transforming into a happy ending. What I do mean is that if we can teach students that failure is a process, is a fact, and is an opportunity for reflection, then maybe failure could be used as a powerful tool for teaching.

> *In writing classes this might look like*: Low stakes writing assignments; innovative writing assignments that challenge students to safely write outside of their comfort zones; frank classroom discussions about the embodied nature of failure and how students can use those feelings of failure as feedback—I recommend anchoring this discussion in habits of mind (*Framework for Success* 2011) or in readings from anthologies like *Bad Ideas about Writing*. (Ball and Loewe 2017)

While the above activities are incredibly common in composition studies, what is less common is using them as teaching tools in the service of "productive failure" or a failure pedagogy. The difference between the garden variety uses of these strategies in writing classrooms and using them as part of a failure pedagogy is the framing of them as moments within a larger writing process that will be dotted with failures.

Second, how would your pedagogy shift or change if you spent more time failing in front of your students or being more honest about your failures to your students? During my interviews, instructors wished that their students knew many things about the feedback process; what if we just told them? And what if we told them that process often functions like a failure loop? What if that was as important as teaching theorems, theories, and policy?

> *In writing classes this might look like*: Sharing your own stories of failure as a writer; showing your students what your writing process looks like; sharing the feedback you've received from others about your writing, how that feedback made you feel, and how you moved forward; discussing your teaching failures and how you've used student feedback to improve (or not) your practice; sharing with students your feedback philosophy (why you're providing feedback, what you hope your students get from your feedback, what informs your feedback beliefs and practices).

Admittedly, the above strategies may not work for all teachers, in all classrooms, or for all students. Depending on cultural and/or social locations, failure is experienced differently for both teachers and students. The fact that not all failures are equal, however, could make for productive classroom conversations. And, if it feels safe and comfortable, it seems worthwhile to continue to acknowledge our own ←59 | 60→failures and struggles with failure as instructors if only to attempt to disrupt deeply inscribed narratives that the teacher is always right, doesn't make mistakes, can't learn from her students, or isn't also constrained by the same educational structures and systems that constrain her students.

Third, what if we folded in reflection on failure as part of our pedagogical practice? How might that change the kinds of risks students took in their writing?

> *In writing classes this might look like*: Embedded reflection in the writing process that asks students to reflect on how they're using feedback, how the feedback makes them feel, and what of that feedback they'll be carrying forward to future writing projects (writing portfolios are ideal spaces for this kind of work); opportunities for students to reflect upon their previous writing and educational experiences (e.g. literacy narratives), low stakes in-class writing assignments that ask students to write about failures—including the ones they haven't recovered from or the ones that don't have a happy ending. What if we acknowledged that failure is a risk, but that learning requires some risk taking?

Again, because universities, including writing classrooms, are spaces that replicate and often reinforce systems of privilege and oppression, asking students and instructors to make themselves vulnerable and to reflect on their failure(s) may not always work or be appropriate. But, in concert with the other pedagogical strategies listed above, encouraging students to engage in "productive failure" as "the opportunity to learn, grow, and develop in purposeful ways" (Inoue 2014, 346) may inch students closer to viewing the feedback they receive from failure as valuable and worthy of reflection.

> *In writing classes this might also look like*: Doing a class inventory of the ways in which students can "fail" in your class and what's at stake if they do (both positive and negative); ask students to create a scale of failure that includes all the different ways they could fail and

how much control they have over these failures (including the effect of external systems and forces such as racism, sexism, classism, ageism, sizeism, heteronormativity).

> Like many writing instructors, I spend a fair amount of time trying to develop analogies for my students to explain key concepts. One key concept that I return to again in again—in my first-year classes and in my senior-level classes—is that you're not supposed to be good at something the first time you do it. In fact, I argue to students that with very few exceptions, they've failed at everything the first time they've tried to do something new. Walking? Lots of falling. Riding your bike? Lots of crashes. Learning to write? Lots of backward letters. Playing a musical instrument? Years of unlistenable "music." If this is the case, I ask them, then why do you think you're going to get to college and immediately be good at every new thing you attempt to do? In other words, we all fail—and fail a lot—until we begin to fail less. And, at some point you sort of forget that you ever failed at all. ←60 | 61→But, reminding myself and reminding my students that everything you know now, everything you've ever done is based on some degree of failure helps us to feel more comfortable failing together. I'm beginning to think that admitting failure might be one of the most vulnerable acts we can commit as educators and one of the most essential tools for learning that we can offer our students.

Returning one last time to the analogy of feedback as a relationship, I have a few lingering thoughts. Like all relationships, the one between failure and feedback requires some work, some maintenance, and some honesty. This is not a relationship that I will ever be entirely comfortable with—this is not *that* kind of relationship—but, as a teacher, learner, and writer, I'm in a relationship with feedback for the long haul. For that reason, coming to terms with the potential *for* failure and the potential *of* failure is essential to becoming for both myself and my students.

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←62 | 63→

CHAPTER FIVE

Rhetorical Velocity and Fake News

JIM RIDOLFO

In this chapter, I return to the concept of rhetorical velocity to consider some of the emerging implications for the term in the era of fake news. About twenty years ago I started to think about some of the issues that would lead to the concept of rhetorical velocity. As an undergraduate student at the University of Rhode Island during the start of the 2001 Afghanistan and 2003 Iraq war, I was working on campus anti-war campaigns that involved a public relations component. Composing and sending press releases, which back then included fax/e-mail, or simply handing a print copy to reporters, was a significant component of that work, and questions around sending out texts, especially using emergent digital means, is part of what drew me to rhetorical studies. When I started at Michigan State University in 2003 for the MA in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing, I did not yet have the rhetorical language to describe what I thought were changes to the network landscapes, but I had some concerns about disinformation and digital circulation then that intersect with today’s larger fake news conversations.

I recall an evening conversation at the 2005 Computers and Writing Conference (C&W) in Stanford with Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, who was on my MA and dissertation committee and who was my co-author on “Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery” (2009), published in *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, and Praxis*. Andrea Lunsford had given her address on “Writing, Technologies, and the Fifth Canon” (2006) that day or the day before, and she made the argument that during the rapid digital growth of the 1990s and early 2000s, “the arts and crafts associated with the fifth canon have moved to the center of ←63 | 64→our discipline” (170). Simultaneously, Doug Eyman talked with Dànielle and me about his work on distribution and circulation. Over a beer or two, I was trying to explain to Dànielle and Doug how my interest in what happens to texts before and after they’re “sent out” is a more specific area of the larger categories Lunsford was talking about. I was not interested in the broad category of delivery, as much as I was the moment when “we send out texts to become other texts” (Sheridan, Ridolfo, Michel 2012). At the time, I didn’t have such plain language. I remember stumbling over my thoughts and saying I was interested in thinking about how rhetoricians might send out texts with an eye for how they would be “chunked,” and especially thinking about the “appropriableness” of a specific text/multimedia piece—how and when a finished work might potentially be appropriated by a third party, and if these instances of potential future appropriation might benefit or not the rhetorician and her goals. I remember Dànielle saying something to the effect of “Hey, that sounds like the beginning of an idea, but ‘appropriableness’ is a horrible word. You’re going to need another term.” I rattled off a couple different terms, and rhetorical velocity was a winner. The next day, I presented to an audience of four and changed the title of my C&W talk to reflect the new term.

DeVoss was correct that I needed new language, and rhetorical velocity became the umbrella term for the concept. The same summer as 2005

C&W, I defended my MA thesis “Rhetoric, Economy, and the Technologies of Activist Delivery” and described the nascent concept with only slightly less awkward language:

> In the inventive stages when delivery (particularly mass delivery) is a concern, rhetorical velocity is the specific set of reflections that involve thinking far and wide through the possible distributions of a text. This includes considerations of economic landscapes and moments and places where textual appropriation may occur. (2005, 9)

By considering “moments and places where textual appropriation may occur,” we are effectively theorizing future sites of remix. DeVoss’s work is at the forefront of remix theory in digital rhetoric studies, and in addition to pushing me to think more carefully about the words that I used, I also learned from her that invention—and delivery-related concerns about the future recomposition of a text are imbued with remix theory. In our 2009 article, this was reflected in the language we chose for the first paragraph: “We are specifically interested in situations where composers anticipate and *strategize future third-party remixing* [emphasis added] of their compositions as part of a larger and complex rhetorical strategy that plays out across physical and digital spaces.” At the time, we were mostly thinking about appropriation that might be beneficial to the original composer, but we also left room for negative or neutral appropriation: the future remix or use of a text that might actively harm the rhetorician’s immediate goals or future self, or appropriation that may have no effect at all. In the landscape of today’s fake news, the potential damage of negative recomposition has consequences for actors beyond ←64 | 65→the rhetorician. For example, there’s the possibility, long term, of a digital chilling effect on public participation if, for example, there’s an increasingly established pattern of digital histories being weaponized by third parties.

As I compose this chapter in early 2019, a right-wing attempt to smear newly elected Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez by releasing a video of her undergraduate Boston University participation in a remix of a dance scene from *The Breakfast Club* (1985) with Pheonix’s song, “Lisztomania,” backfired. While the undergraduate Ocasio-Cortez probably did not anticipate that a decade in the future her participation in the remix phenomenon would be used in an attempt to smear her, the right-wing group that tried to leverage the video did not anticipate how the video would be celebrated (Matsakis 2019). This story is an interesting example of texts becoming other texts. On the one hand, the 2010 version of Pheonix's "Lisztomania" seemed harmless enough and covered under copyright and fair use. But in 2013 the song became a locus for debates about copyright and censorship when Liberation Music PTY Ltd demanded that a video of a Lawrence Lessig lecture on fair use that used the song be taken down (Tan 2014). Nine years later, another 2010 video of "Lisztomania" emerged, one that had sat largely idle on YouTube during the interim. This time Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was a participant in the video, which was politically weaponized (albeit unsuccessfully) against her. Rather than rhetorically harm her standing, the video at the very least increased her popularity among supporters. In this decades-long sequence of events dating back to 1985, we can now see a complex longitudinal network of texts, actors, rhetorical circumstances, and acts of composition, delivery, circulation, and appropriation that question the role of different authors in the cumulative network effect of how a meme circulates and evolves over time. That said, the above example does not include some of the more extreme consequences of fake news. For example, real damage is produced by the viral spread of false lies, from the impact of Sandy Hook conspiracy theorists on parents who lost children in that act of terrorism, to the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theories that almost ended in violent tragedy (Fisher et al. 2016).

In 2003–2005, I was thinking about the problem of network authorship in terms of understanding how people might read and evaluate the authorship and rhetorical impact of texts over time. I developed a pedagogy around comprehensive online document evaluation (CODE), which asked my first-year students to explore "how a digital document 'works': from finding the identities of the author(s) to searching out past revisions of the document, to situating the document in time, place, and determining the physical and geographic locations of documents" and "critically research the … *who, what, when, where and why of digital texts*” (Ridolfo 2006). Most of this was focused around the perceived crisis at the time of how students might evaluate and assess online sources, which at the time was mostly static websites, not the viral social media sharing of news and ←65 | 66→information. I wanted students to understand the specific location of a server, for example, and identify domain name ownership, as well as determine who else links to a particular webtext from other sites, and when they do so. This investigative triangulation work across hypertext and web servers was more procedurally straightforward for students to learn how to do than today’s viral text that’s often rapidly shared across public and private Facebook accounts, or retweeted and amplified by Russian botnets.

For example, we know from the research of Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara (2016) that “the presence of social media bots can indeed negatively affect democratic political discussion rather than improving it, which in turn can potentially alter public opinion and endanger the integrity of the Presidential election.” What is striking about their work, however, is the amount of labor needed to determine what exactly is happening as messages are circulated. Rather than determine the authorship of a particular digital text and identify who is citing that text, Bessi and Ferrara had to analyze 3.8 million tweets to discern the relationship of social media bots to people, and to what degree one impacts the other. In “Remixing and Reconsidering Rhetorical Velocity” (2017) Dànielle DeVoss and I reflect on rhetorical velocity almost ten years later, and at the end of the piece we touch on a concept William Hart-Davidson and I have been thinking a lot about related to rhetoric and information warfare—the fog of digital rhetoric: “The fog of digital rhetoric may lead some to believe one narrative about the origin and rhetorical velocity of a text over another, or due to their distributive obscurity, doubt the origin of a text entirely” (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2017, 67; see also Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2019). One way this occurs is when the circulation of a text itself may hide origins. For example, Facebook’s public/privacy settings are such that the propagation of a meme on Facebook may obscure the circulation of that text. Where did the text come from? Well, immediately a friend. Beyond that, a friend of a friend? And so on into circulative obscurity. What might be the motivations of the author(s)? Unclear. These empty steps function as an enthymeme in which users may read their own answer into these premises. For example, in a January 2019 “share two photos of how aging has hit you” meme that went viral on Facebook and Instagram, Hart-Davidson argues that while people may opt into the meme with the intention of camaraderie with friends, family, and their own memories, “this post two photos of yourself thing feels like a way to gather a data set to train a machine learning classifier for facial recognition to be more accurate in ID’ing people based on an old photo” (Hart-Davidson 2019). What does this meme have in common with fake news? Velocity and speed, opt-in participation through data sharing, and lack of knowledge about origins.

The rhetorical velocity of fake news is first then a research problem with enthymematic qualities that reside not in the argument itself, but in the specific instances of delivery and circulation that are obscured by the problem of hindsight, ←66 | 67→human/botnet relationships, access to distributive networks, and time. Compounding this problem even more is how the fog of digital rhetoric emerges around news events and practitioners. Within moments, thousands of texts that may or may not have a relationship to one another are present. Only a very small portion of information and its distributive flows might be immediately visible to someone in a particular moment. This means that practitioner researcher must first question *abductively* that what is in present network view is not the whole story, and then have the technical, rhetorical knowledge, and network access to research the spread of that information.

While the research practitioner is doing this, however, time is not on her side. Consider, for example, if an individual pours a giant tub of marbles down a staircase. The person dropping the marbles may have the vantage point to see where, generally, most of the marbles are going. The act of dropping the marbles may, in fact, be quick. A brief moment or second. However, for the next person that walks into the room and sees some marbles on the floor, there may be uncertainty about where they originated from, how many they are, where they have rolled, and the time investigating and picking up all of the marbles will be significantly greater than the time it took to drop the marbles down a flight of stairs. Imagine that the person dropping the marbles is a social media strategy company and the marbles are dozens of pieces of targeted advertising content across multiple platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). If we see the ad on Twitter as sponsored content, we don't know immediately whom the ads are targeting as a demographic (that would take a larger sample of people targeted to share their experience with the content and then piece together a possible target audience), or necessarily all of the actors behind the ad. Researchers are left at a disadvantage, as a disproportionate amount of work must first be done before they can identify and explain to others what rhetorical campaign work is happening. Consider the availability of knowledge to the practitioner as it compares to that of the group of onlookers. For the author, the initial instances of causal distribution are more readily visible, and this makes the later instances easier to locate and observe. By contrast, the initial research perspective is limited to determining the relationship between events, even when the origins may be obscured.

Equally significant a problem for researchers is the difficulty distinguishing the causal link between a practitioner's activity and its consequences. This research task would include locating where the practitioner's activity begins and ends, and perhaps most challenging, where the practitioner's strategy of delivery begins and ends. Consider, for example, the release of a meme. Where does the practitioner's strategy begin (sending the meme to x and y friends, sharing the meme on Facebook at an opportune time of day, posting on Twitter at a later point), and where does the activity of the meme surpass the anticipated strategy of the practitioner? Discerning answers to these questions from a large and complex matrix ←67 | 68→of data (such as a large archive of Tweets) is difficult and time consuming, and this delay between a large number of onlookers understanding activity of delivery may be a strategic advantage. In another example, consider how deceptive spam-based phishing schemes work, where criminals take advantage of the critical time required for IT staff to educate people about a particularly deceptive e-mail scheme (see Jensen 2011).

TEACHING THE RHETORICAL VELOCITY OF FAKE NEWS

As a teacher, I find myself back to where I was in 2003–2005 thinking about how students need to learn to read network delivery. A core argument of my CODE pedagogy was that *what's outside the digital text* is just as important, if not more so, than the authorial *content* of texts to traditional analog forms of publication and citation practices. By this, I mean that we need to understand the content of digital texts as well as the circulation and origins of them. Taken together, all three (content, circulation, origin) provide information that's necessary for people to evaluate how memes and fake news circulate. In my 400-level special topics course this semester, I am teaching a course on Rhetoric and Information Warfare. In one week-long assignment, students read about botnets and the circulation of fake news, and then as a class we monitor the select botnet activity around a political account, which this semester is Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Examining as a class the last several hundred recent followers on his account, we then identify accounts that appear to exhibit all of the qualities of bots. Following Bessi and Ferrara's guidelines, we search for accounts with a profile photograph that looks

> (i) like the default one or it is customized …; (ii) absence of geographical metadata …; and, (iii) activity statistics such as total number of tweets and frequency of posting (bots exhibit incessant activity and excessive amounts of tweets), proportion of retweets over original tweets (bots retweet contents much more frequently than generating new tweets), proportion of followers over followees (bots usually have less followers and more followees), account

> creation date (bots are more likely to have recently-created accounts), randomness of the username (bots are likely to have randomly-generated usernames). (Bessi and Ferrara)

We then do a close analysis of these accounts, their tweet and like history, and list of followers and followees. We pay close attention to each tweet’s timestamp (date of creation) and conduct a Google image search on any profile photographs to verify if they have been scraped from a legitimate account. Next, we monitor their activity over the course of the next week. Who do these accounts follow? What tweets do they like? What chronological frequency of activity do they exhibit? ←68 | 69→Where and when does the text they produce and tweet also occur, word for word? Does their activity align more with an economic objective (propagating click bait or influencing search results), or an ideological agenda? By doing this close analysis of twenty nodes in different botnets, as a class we are able to talk about the micro-level work of large-scale botnets and begin to talk more specifically about how they distort online perceptions and rapidly circulate stories. After looking at the machine-generated activity that supports the circulation of fake news, we are then able to talk about the content of those texts and how they work in relationship to *kairos* and chronological time.

What we are able to discuss is the complicated relationship between humans and their means of distribution. If we are to think about the rhetorical velocity of someone intending to spread fake news, what that means is that they require others to trust the validity and claim of the information and distribution mechanism at face value, and then share. From the perspective of rhetorical agents attempting to prime the pump of a new fake news cycle, the failure of others to question the validity of the information or verify its claims is a success for parties attempting to cultivate confusion about a larger set of facts or to propagate a false narrative. This amounts to a failure of social relations, as Laura Micciche correctly points out in her comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. In their 2019 *Science* article “The Spread of True and False News Online” (2018), Soroush Vosoughy, Deb Roy, and Sinan Arial report that when they “estimated a model of the likelihood of retweeting, [they] … found that falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth.” Vosoughy, Roy, and Arial argue that this can have immediate implications for platforms such as Twitter that digital publics look to for real-time reporting and perspectives. Such implications include “the misallocation of resources during terror attacks and natural disasters, the misalignment of business investments, and misinformed elections.” In a cascading effect, micro-failures at the social level of distribution and circulation may quickly ripple into larger societal failures. In teaching students to identify the activity of botnets in real-time social media events, verify before sharing information, and trace the origins of viral stories using digital network tools such as Indiana University’s Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) suite, we are helping to inform students about how, where, and why disinformation is created, distributed, and circulated online (Davis et al. 2016). We are preventing the success of the few to disinform in order to mitigate the social and institutional failures of the many. That said, we are not at a moment yet where this can be easily systematized for students. However, we can teach processes and research techniques that will help students frame and understand these moments as they unfold in real-time.

←69 | 70→

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CHAPTER SIX

Failure as Exigence: Accusation and Apology as Opportunities for (Re)invention

R. J. LAMBERT

> We’re sorry for the massive disruption it’s caused to their lives. There’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I’d like my life back.
>
> —BP CEO Tony Hayward (CNN 2016)

TRAUMA AS CONTEXT

On April 20, 2010, explosions at the Deepwater Horizon oil drilling rig of the British Petroleum (BP) Macondo Prospect in the Gulf of Mexico initiated “by far the world’s largest accidental release of oil into marine waters” at 4.9 million barrels (Robertson and Krauss 2010). In the weeks that followed, the public’s blame for causing the oil spill inspired BP and its chief executive Tony Hayward to deny, minimize, and apologize. After a traumatic event like an international oil spill, multiple lines of argument are communicated at any given time, as described more fully below.

This oil spill, a combination of environmental frailty and human error, is one of many significant traumas over approximately the last two decades which various stakeholders have experienced, documented, participated in, and responded to through ubiquitous networked communicative technologies.[1] The litany of impactful traumas mediated through technology goes back at least to the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 and includes the September 11, 2001, attacks, flooding after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007, and—more recently—the devastation in Puerto Rico after Hurricane ←71 | 72→Maria in 2017, and the 2018 shootings at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

At least two things become immediately evident from these examples. First, we should expect ecological disasters and other large-scale traumas to continue into the foreseeable future. The question is not *if*, but rather *when*, *how*, and *to whom* the next traumatic event will occur. Second, it is clear that new media, social networking, and communicative technologies both enable and constrain discursive responses to traumatic events. In the past, victims of traumas might have found voice in newspaper or television interviews, framed by the meta-narratives of news media, but most stakeholders would have experienced traumas privately. Networked technologies have opened new venues for responses to traumatic events, which include narrative as well as overtly critical discourses. Although it should not be understood as an unproblematic or entirely democratic phenomenon, participation in new media and social networking has come to both generate and shape responses to traumatic events.

By attending to the plurality of post-oil spill discourses, this chapter complicates the well-established field of crisis response and anticipates technologically mediated responses to future traumatic events. I advocate the pluralization and democratization of “crisis response,” traditionally understood as a centralized response issued by organizations, governments, or businesses, and I suggest that studying communication related to traumatic events can no longer focus exclusively on unidirectional corporate crisis *response* by paid public relations managers. Instead, multidirectional and plural crisis *responses*—often asynchronous, intertextual, multimodal, and digitally mediated—constitute effective rhetorical participation by victims and observers.

As my analysis of the 2010 oil spill will illustrate, “crisis response” now includes multiple authors, genres, media, technologies, and especially *purposes*. Purposes are important insofar as “crisis response” has become synonymous with “crisis resolution” or “crisis management,” both of which imply the unidirectional purpose of mitigating a crisis for shareholders or the general public. To understand crisis responses in their plurality is to allow for purposes that directly contradict the official crisis response of an entity. These purposes may call attention to rather than deflect attention away from a crisis and may exacerbate a crisis rather than mitigate it.

The frequency of large-scale traumas coincides with and may contribute to a surge in technologically mediated responses that assign and deny blame for a complex of institutional and discursive failures. Although these responses unfold according to predictable genres—blame, apology, defense, and re-accusation—the influence of technology begins to democratize prevailing power dynamics in a given culture. As a result, daily communicative technologies and social media amplify the voices of victims and observers, who utilize time-tested genres to keep corporations and governments in check.

←72 | 73→

A useful metaphor for understanding the power dynamics of traumatic contexts is Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zones,” which she defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power … as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (1993, 34). Pratt originally intended for contact zones "to reconsider models of community" within literary and educational contexts, but her concept fittingly describes the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, as well the "aftermaths" of past and, presumably, future traumas (34).

Specifically, contact zones broaden our understanding of community within traumatic contexts. Pratt describes how "the idea of the contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy" (2002, 11). By highlighting clash and conflict rather than utopian symmetry between subjects, Pratt's idea of community differs from traditional conceptions of speech communities, which "tended to be theorized as discrete, self-defined, coherent entities, held together by a homogenous competence or grammar shared identically and equally among all the members" (11).

John Swales's work on discourse communities begins to "resolve the logical problem of assigning membership of a community to individuals who neither admit nor recognize that such a community exists" (1988, 213). To do so, he characterizes discourse communities primarily according to their shared use of genres, noting that "strong levels of interpersonal relationship are not criterial for the creation of a discourse community" (211). In this sense, the "trauma community" may be defined in terms of subjects' participation in certain post-trauma genre conventions, rather than by social relationships between individuals who may or may not share geographic proximity.

Post-trauma discourse communities are often diverse and heterogenous, and communities are characterized primarily by their genre participation. Rhetorical scholarship illustrates how recent traumatic contexts have invited historical narratives, expressions of grief, and critiques of community and industry. Less than a year after the September 11 attacks, Jenny Edkins analyzed symbolic responses to that singular national security trauma: "Traumatic events demand a response that recognizes their impact rather than one that moves rapidly to forgetting the trauma or incorporating it into existing narratives” (2002, 243). As a necessary starting point, she defines trauma as that which “involves an exposure to an event so shocking that our everyday expectations of how the world works are severely disrupted” (245).

Traumatic disruption is often generative as victims of traumatic events turn to writing and other forms of discourse, such as multimodal productions, to narrate or critique their subjective experiences. Looking at responses to trauma, Edkins “examine[s]; a number of ways of responding to trauma,” which she arranges in ←73 | 74→four categories of exigence: “those that securitize, those that criminalize, those that aestheticize and those that politicize” (245). Similarly, Anis Bawarshi (2010) conceives of genres as productive rather than merely interpretive. Drawing from Edkins and Bawarshi, I contend that genres can enable agency within traumatic contexts. The remainder of this chapter explores genres of accusation and apology following the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. These genres are productive because they generate conversation about traumatic events, offering an alternative to official damage control genres of response produced by corporations and governments.

FAILURE AS EXIGENCE

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill, while an environmental and economic failure, was also a distinctly rhetorical failure to the extent that mediated responses served to deflect rather than address the spill. Perhaps the most abundant and recognizable discursive responses to traumatic events such as this are genres characterized by accusation and apology, as responsible parties, victims, and outside observers attempt to explain, blame, excuse, and defend.

Halford Ross Ryan stipulates that the genres *kategoria* (accusation) and *apologia* (apology or defense) constitute a “speech set” in which the function of each genre and the vital issues pertaining to both must be understood in relation to each other (1982, 254). Using two of Walter Fisher's four motives for communication—affirmation and purification—Ryan explains that the motive of *kategoria* is to affirm or "to give birth to an image … through accusatory discourse," while the motive of *apologia* is to purify, correct, or modify the previously affirmed "image through apologetic discourse" (255). The speech set of accusation and defense is recognizable following any trauma and usually plays out in the media for multiple audiences.

However, the modern media landscape ensures that most high-stakes traumas are not only characterized by a finite speech set of *kategoria* followed by a responsive *apologia*. The expansion of discursive options available to subjects across media and networked communicative technologies expands the speech set. Recent scholarship has shown that the speech set of *kategoria* and *apologia* is often followed by a further "acceptance or rejection" of the defense (Tavuchis 1991), in what Kevin Stein has labeled *antapologia* (2008). According to Stein, *apologia* may be followed by reiterated accusation or by a "third component" of the speech set, a specific critique of the *apologia*'s image-repair strategy (2008, 19). While it is not my goal to trace every accusation and response from this case, the public's critiques of BP and then-CEO Tony Hayward illustrate the generative potential of the rhetorical speech set of *kategoria* (accusation), *apologia* (apology or defense), and *antapologia* (defense critique) for current and future traumatic events.

←74 | 75→

Following large-scale traumas, news media quickly report known facts about the context and participants, and these facts imply responsibility until causes become known or are proven. In the case of the 2010 oil spill, the implicit *kategoria* or accusation was that, as the corporation leasing the Deepwater Horizon, BP bore responsibility for the explosion that injured and killed employees, as well as for the oil spill and its potential environmental impact. Initial accusations took the form of news reports across media, including print, web, television, and radio. Two articles from April 21, 2010—the day after the explosion—provided what facts were known at the time and established specific lines of critique to which BP would be called to respond through *apologia* (AP 2010; Purpura et al. 2010).

One of the first news accounts of the explosion and oil spill was an Associated Press article published on FoxNews.com that alluded to the potential human and environmental costs of the explosion and also established BP's association with the trauma:

> Rescuers in helicopters and boats searched the Gulf of Mexico for 11 missing workers Wednesday after a thunderous explosion rocked a huge oil drilling platform and lit up the night sky with a pillar of flame. Seventeen people were injured, three critically. The blast Tuesday night aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig 50 miles off the Louisiana coast could prove to be one of the nation's deadliest offshore drilling accidents of the past half-century.… The rig, which was under contract to the oil giant BP, was doing exploratory drilling but was not in production.… Seventy-nine Transocean workers, six BP employees and 41 contract workers were aboard. (AP 2010)

After reporting initial facts about the event, the authors went on to suggest the danger and risk of offshore drilling, both generally and in the specific geography of the Gulf of Mexico. The news article's concluding paragraphs stated directly, "Working on offshore oil rigs is a dangerous job," and then enumerated "69 offshore deaths, 1,349 injuries and 858 fires and explosions in the Gulf" of Mexico since 2001.

Another implicit accusation of BP's responsibility came in an April 21, 2010, article in the local Louisiana *Times-Picayune* newspaper, which described BP's leasing of the rig in financial terms that set up later critiques of corporate greed: "The Deepwater Horizon has been leased to BP Exploration & Production, Inc. since 2007 at a rate of about $500,000 a day" (Purpura et al. 2010). Unlike the Associated Press, which described the dangers of offshore drilling generally and regionally, the *Times-Picayune* outlined BP's safety record and investigations, suggesting more directly that BP might have been at fault:

> BP has two open cases and 27 closed cases in the last five years in the United States, according to OSHA’s website. BP operates the Texas City, Texas, refinery that was the site of a 2005 explosion that killed 15 and injured 170 in the nation’s worst industrial accident since 1990. The U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, which investigated ←75 | 76→the Texas City explosion, told Bloomberg News Service that it is considering investigating the rig incident. (Purpura et al. 2010)

Interestingly, both articles included apparent attempts at real-time damage control in the hours following the explosion and oil spill. The first article paraphrased a regional representative of the International Association of Drilling Contractors as suggesting offshore oil drilling “has become safer in recent years thanks to improved training, safety systems, and maintenance.” Similarly, the second article quoted Coast Guard Rear Admiral Mary Landry as saying, “We are only seeing minor sheening on the water. We do not see a major spill emanating from this incident.” This contrasted with then-vice president of BP David Rainey, who was quoted as saying, “There is the potential for a pollution event,” a statement that was ultimately proven true, yet “pollution event” underscores how BP representatives’ word choice rarely aligned with the severity of the environmental impact as experienced by those who lived in the Gulf Coast region (Purpura et al. 2010).

The implicit safety accusations against BP all but demanded an apologetic response. On May 30, over a month after the explosion, then-CEO Tony Hayward appeared in a television interview while visiting cleanup efforts in the Gulf Coast. This interview was one of many that Hayward gave to print and news journalists and functioned as an apology in response to news articles and other accusations. In the interview, Hayward apologized in general terms and described the ongoing cleanup efforts:

> We’re sorry for the massive disruption it’s caused to their lives. There’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I’d like my life back. So there’s no one who wants this thing done more than I do and we are doing everything we can to contain the oil offshore, defend the shoreline and return people’s lives to normal as fast as we can. There’s just no effort being spared in any dimension. (CNN 2016)

Hayward’s gaffe was one of the most memorable and criticized discursive failures following the oil spill, inviting satirical responses, additional journalistic news coverage, and other critiques in social media and popular culture. The most critiqued part of the quotation was: “There’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I’d like my life back.”

However, there are rhetorical failures in the quote’s entirety which exemplify one of Hayward’s apologetic challenges. Hayward failed to perform the interview in his corporate capacity, which would reflect the institutional constraints on his subject position. In other words, he was expected to speak apologetically for BP, rather than defensively speaking for himself. Hayward tried to personally identify with the suffering of Gulf Coast victims in order to deflect blame and add weight to his apology. Instead, his comments centered his personal discomfort at being inconvenienced, fulfilling stereotypes of callousness associated with corporate leadership. His failed apology served as exigence for direct defense critiques ←76 | 77→(*antapologia*) and new lines of accusation (*kategoria*). By explicitly highlighting his own difficulties as primary motivation for rectifying the oil spill, Hayward’s comments failed to achieve the image repair associated with apologetic genres.

Although many Gulf Coast subjects critiqued Hayward’s *apologetic* interview comments, a salient example was a Grand Isle, Louisiana, billboard framed by BP’s green and yellow brand colors that portrayed a grinning caricature of Tony Hayward as “Tony Baloney,” wearing a “BP” hat and accompanied by a paraphrase of Hayward’s controversial interview comments, “I Want My Life Back” (fuzzfocus_exclusive, n.d.). The billboard also included a now-defunct URL for www.TonyBaloney.org. While Hayward’s gaffe was quoted and critiqued extensively in the media and online, this billboard, in its visual and textual simplicity, illustrates how *antapologia* grew from his failed apologetic statement, portraying Hayward and BP in a negative light and inviting yet further *apologia*.

As critiques of Hayward’s interview comments proliferated, he and BP were called to directly respond with further apologies in a Facebook post and television ad. On June 2, 2010, the BP Facebook page posted an apology credited to Hayward and titled “BP CEO Tony Hayward Issues an Apology for Remarks.” The apology quoted the original wording that drew so much criticism and acknowledged that his interview comments were “hurtful.” In this apology, Hayward places himself in his audience’s subject position by quoting his earlier statement and exclaiming that he was “appalled” when he “read that recently” (BP America 2010).

Following the Facebook apology, users again critiqued Hayward and BP within the user comments section. Users posted comments such as “Nice job, Mr. $4 million-a-year big mouth,” and “you just fucking care about money but you are destroying the only world we have to live on, STOP THE SPILL ALREADY!” Another Facebook user similarly emphasized the disparity in wealth between Hayward and those affected by the spill:

> FUCK YOU BP-from one pissed off and heartbroken Floridian preparing to watch my beloved state be destroyed in the coming days. 14 BILLION IN PROFIT A YEAR. 66 MILLION DOLLARS A FUCKING DAY. AND BITTERLY FOUGHT TO NOT SPEND A LITTLE EXTRA MONEY ON PROPER EQUIPMENT AND SAFETY FEATURES. (BP America 2010)

These comments represent how the actual audiences of Hayward’s apology critiqued his discourse and responded again through *antapologia* in real time. It is stunning to consider the power disparity represented on each side of this Facebook exchange. Hayward, a wealthy CEO for one of the world’s largest and richest corporations, posted a brief apology, inspiring timely critique by actual users, representing not only the immediate disaster community (identified in some comments as Gulf Coast residents), but also broader audiences paying attention to the trauma of the oil spill.

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BP’s televised apology advertisement began airing on June 3, 2010, the day after Hayward’s Facebook apology was posted. CNN described the commercial as containing “a carefully crafted message,” perhaps contrasting the ad’s scripted content to Hayward’s failed comments during his earlier television interview. In the apologetic commercial, Hayward was at times shown “on location” against a Gulf of Mexico backdrop, while at other times video footage of BP’s cleanup and containment efforts were foregrounded and accompanied by Hayward’s audio message (transcribed by CNN):

> The Gulf spill is a tragedy that never should have happened. BP has taken full responsibility for cleaning up the spill in the Gulf. We’ve helped organize the largest environmental response in this country’s history. More than 2 million feet of boom, 30 planes and over 1,300 boats are working to protect the shoreline. Where oil reaches the shore, thousands of people are ready to clean it up. We will honor all legitimate claims. And our cleanup efforts will not come at any cost to taxpayers. To those affected and your families, I am deeply sorry. The Gulf is home for thousands of BP’s employees and we all feel the impact. To all the volunteers and for the strong support of the government, thank you. We know it is our responsibility to keep you informed. And do everything we can so this never happens again. We will get this done. We will make this right. (CNN Wire Staff 2010)

As in his prior apologies, including the failed television interview and Facebook apology, Hayward attempted in this advertisement to straddle subject positions, on the one hand speaking in his corporate subjectivity as BP CEO (“We know it is our responsibility to keep you informed. And do everything we can so this never happens again.”), and on the other identifying more with BP workers who are local subjects affected by the oil spill (“The Gulf is home for thousands of BP’s employees and we all feel the impact.”).

I conclude this tracing of the unfolding rhetorical speech set with an additional *antapologia*, which directly critiqued BP’s televised apology commercial. The animated television show *South Park* parodied Hayward’s “I’m Sorry” within one of its episodes. The 24-second video clip description on the South Park Studies website described it as “The President of BP issues an apology for the Gulf Spill” (Parker and Stone 2010). In the video, a cartoon caricature of Hayward speaks directly to the audience and repeats variations of the phrases “we are deeply sorry” and “we’re sorry” in multiple settings, starting with a ship in what appears to be the Gulf Coast, followed by an arctic setting where the cartoon Hayward pets a baby seal, and then a domestic kitchen scene where the cartoon Hayward places cookies in the oven, ending with the animated Hayward skiing alone down a mountain. The monotone repetition of the apology in each scene, set against leisurely stock backgrounds, contrasts with the ecological severity of the oil spill and robs the phrase “I’m sorry” of sincerity, instead presenting it as a disingenuous platitude. The settings in which Hayward’s caricature is shown apologizing amount to a critique both of BP’s efforts to show ←78 | 79→environmental concern and of Hayward’s socioeconomic status and the buffer it provides him.

FAILURE AS FUTURE

In *Community Action and Organizational Change*, Brenton Faber examines real world responses to change, writing, “people need to make decisions in less than ideal environments. In the face of change, people need to act” (2002, 14). A community’s discursive responses to large-scale traumas help us understand the ways in which publics negotiate change through daily activities, including technologically mediated and public discourses. As this chapter has shown, official responses to trauma follow predictable genres through which subjects accuse and apologize, critique and defend. It is important to understand the functions and purposes of those communications in the contexts of traumatic events and to gauge their rhetorical success or failure through public reception. By way of conclusion, I look to the generative potential of community responses to traumatic events.

Traumatic contexts such as the BP Oil Spill inspire community responses and foster engaged publics. In “Sophists for Social Change,” David Coogan describes a “middle space” where urban teens responded to changes in their community, concluding that “a middle space is not generating and then disseminating ideal strategies for rhetorical intervention but generating publics capable of addressing their own social problems” (2010, 159). Adapting Coogan’s “middle space” for traumatic contexts would afford communities the agency to identify and respond to traumas inventively, rather than constraining their responses according to predetermined rhetorical strategies.

Similarly, Jeffrey Grabill has examined “the knowledge work of everyday life,” which illustrates how constraints on discourse often transcend individuals and specific contexts and are part of larger systems (2007, 2). In *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*, Grabill shows how “information has become a powerful social good” and argues that “interventions at the level of infrastructure are necessary to enable citizen action in communities” (20). Importantly, Grabill identifies the possibility for community knowledge to constitute expertise about community change and problems, writing, “knowledge produced in communities must be shown to be expert in some way, to be capable of contesting the rhetorics of expert institutions” (59). Enabling this knowledge is the ubiquity of communicative technologies, which strikingly reveal asymmetrical power relations in response to traumatic events and produce dissonance around institutional “crisis response” strategies.

Clearly, there is social motive to negotiate asymmetrical power relations through mediated communications about traumatic events. While Pratt’s original ←79 | 80→description of contact zones preceded technological innovations and communicative technologies, Philip J. Burns (1999) has extended her work to the electronic contact zones that mediate resistance to power. In “Supporting Deliberative Democracy: Pedagogical Arts of the Contact Zone of the Electronic Public Sphere,” Burns characterizes electronic contact zones as “civic contexts within the public sphere itself” that can generate online spaces for participating in responsive democracy (129). Using Carolyn Miller’s suggestion that “exigence must be seen neither as a cause of rhetorical action nor as intention, but as social motive” (1984, 30), traumatic contexts provide the very exigence for community engagement in a digital age.

NOTE

1. The term *communicative technologies* indicates smartphones, tablets, and computers, which may be used to communicate, but are also used for entertainment or productivity.

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← 81 | 82 →

INTERCHAPTER ONE

Redefining Failure: Controlling a Sense of Self

NANCY G. BARRóN AND SIBYLLE GRUBER

STARTING THE DISCUSSION

J.K. Rowling, in her Harvard commencement speech in 2008, told her audience that “we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure, but the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it.” In our lives as students and academics, we have been given many sets of criteria and constructs of failure. The most negative ones emphasize the unsucessful performance as students, teachers, and researchers; the positive ones encourage us to see failure as always leading to new information as well as new actions and behaviors. We have been told that failure is inevitable in our attempts to succeed, and because we are classified as faculty of color and international faculty, we are encouraged to see failure as a possible site of resistance in our attempt to subvert normative behavior. In this chapter, we combine critical and theoretical explorations with personal narratives to emphasize the importance of contextualizing perceived failure in connection with changing perceptions of who we are as individuals and members of specific discourse communities. We use our experiences as faculty of color and international faculty to show that discussions of individual failure have to be augmented by discussions of systemic failure—we fail within a system because of our experiences as social, cultural, political, religious, and gendered human beings, a view that foregrounds constant shifts in our identity development. Acknowledging these shifts, we argue, allows for discussions of risk taking, success, and failure as malleable and changing. It also encourages us to address how non-dominant faculty and students respond ←83 | 84→to and often contradict the attribution, allegation, and suggestion of failure in an academic environment that has been defined by dominant strategies.

FAILING TO BELONG, AT RISK OF DISAPPEARING

Risk in educational settings, Steven Bialostok and Robert Whitman argue, is often connected to “negative outcome[s];, danger or peril” (2012, 2), exemplified by the naming of “at-risk” students. This notion of “at-risk” was especially popularized by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which, in *A Nation At Risk*, paints a bleak picture of education: “We report to the American people that … the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (1983, par. 1). Fifteen years later, in *A Nation Still at Risk*, William Bennett et al. described “the sea of educational mediocrity” in which “large numbers of students remain at risk. Intellectually and morally, America’s educational system is failing far too many people” (1998, par. 7).

The risks identified in the reports are absolute and constant, and are expressed as deficiencies “in terms of the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills school and college graduates should possess” (*A Nation at Risk* 1983).

This approach to risk as identifiable danger that spans across the nation's educational system, according to the National Commission on Excellence in Education saw it, only requires to "create a Learning Society, in which public, private, and parochial schools; colleges and universities; vocational and technical schools and institutes; libraries; science centers, museums, and other cultural institutions; and corporate training and retraining programs offer opportunities and choices for all to learn throughout life" (1983, par. 33). However, neither of the reports takes into account the social, political, and cultural differences that compose risk nor who is seen as at risk. Instead, as Bialostok and Whitman point out, the term "at-risk" "had become a catchphrase, a commonplace adjective used by the academic and education-policy community to mean any student for whom, for one or more reasons, failure in school would be likely" (2012, 23). To "fix" at-risk students—mainly understood as socioeconomically poor students, students from working-class backgrounds, immigrant students, students with a single parent, students of color, and students with medical conditions—was at the forefront of our education system in the 1970s and 1980s and remains a goal today.

We, too, were identified as being at risk by a system that didn't know us. As students, we were mostly unaware of this classification which came early for Nancy, a Latinx woman who grew up in a working-class community in Los Angeles, and late for Sibylle, who grew up in a rural working-class community in Austria and came to the U.S. in the late 1980s. Nancy refers to herself as both Chicanx ←84 | 85→and Latinx to identify with the changing political discussions of identity and culture and to maintain a connection with the Chicanx and Latinx communities she belongs to, while Sibylle refers to herself as foreigner, international, and alien to better participate in and engage with her constructed identities experienced in the U.S.

Academic Topics—Nancy

“Bilingualism and affirmative action, therefore, have only created situations where students are incapable of succeeding in this country,” my linguistics professor had concluded her lecture. We were required to read Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*, and the entire lecture and class discussion was designed to argue against bilingual education and multilingualism. I was a senior who grew up in a Spanish-speaking household and learned English mostly at school. Political correctness, multiculturalism, diversity, and multilingualism were deemed un-American on my campus where the political and religious right had a stronghold during the 1980s, and where an Anglo student shouted at me for robbing her Anglo friend of her seat because, as a token minority, I was given preferential admission.

I was anxious and trembling when I raised my hand and started to speak: “I disagree with Rodriguez’s experiences. Bilingualism encourages a larger vocabulary to work with. With more words come more ideas and …” Before I could finish my sentence, the professor, who hadn’t looked at me all semester long, interrupted and said to the class at large, “There’s always someone who’ll take a contrary stand.” The majority of students snickered, but even though my stomach was turning, I was determined to finish my point and raised my hand again. She looked away and asked, “Anyone else?” I spoke, “I have one more point to make,” shifting from my left to right hand.

“Anyone? Okay, let’s move on.” “Anyone” did not include me.

Racism and exclusion were part of many undergraduate experiences. “There weren’t any Blacks and Mexicans who signed the Declaration of Independence. It isn’t their country,” an Anglo student stated. “If any of them step foot on my property, I’ll shoot them.” The professor, from Mexíco, wasn’t prepared for the racism on campus, had no response at the ready, and the student continued to offer racist perspectives and call anyone a racist when we counter-argued. I learned to hate childish and immature behaviors from individuals who misconstrued cultural pride with superiority. I also learned that I didn’t want THEM to win, and so I wouldn’t quit school.

I decided that I had to graduate to complicate ignorant racists' and ill-prepared professors' perspectives. These professors, even when trying to give us compliments, insulted us. When one professor said, "I love teaching Hispanic students. You're so obedient and never question your professors," we sat silent and stunned. ←85 | 86→I continued school, read as much as I could to learn how to counteract the racism at school, in books, and coming from all guest speakers. I studied hard to pass my classes, even when I was invisible to the professors, even when other students put stickers with "Nigger go home" in the hallways, even when students said to me in class, "You don't belong here," and even when our pizza sat on the counter while all of the other customers were served at their tables.

You Just Don't Understand!—Sibylle

"This paper does not follow the assignment instructions," stated the professor. The instructions had simply stated: "Do a close reading of one of the novels we discussed in class." The professor's comment, written in red ink at the end of what I had considered an excellent close reading of James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, was the only non-grammar-related feedback I received in a graduate-level African American literature course. I had spent much time researching James Baldwin's life, the time period, and the political, cultural, and social situation of the time. I had not previously studied U.S. race relations, discrimination, and the racism experienced by African Americans, and I wanted to make sure that I could address what was happening during Baldwin's time and what encouraged and prompted him to write this semi-biographical novel. "You were supposed to do a close reading and focus on the text." I still didn't understand why he thought that I didn't focus on the text when all I did was analyze the text by bringing in the larger contextual information in order to support Baldwin's themes in the novel. I wanted to ask what it was that I didn't do to make this into a close reading paper. I was certainly willing to learn from the mistake I made, even though I wasn't sure yet what the mistake was. But before I could find out what changes I needed to make, he continued: “And your writing is not graduate student quality. I can’t pass this paper the way it’s written.”

At the University of Vienna, I was considered one of the better writers, and I had received recognition for being able to articulate my ideas in English. But I soon saw my American counterparts as more capable, more confident, and more qualified to study literature. They were different from me, and they all seemed to understand implicitly what was expected of them as students in an American classroom. Instead of being pulled into a professor’s office to be scolded about not understanding the assignment and not being able to write, they went to a professor’s office to talk about their upcoming papers and receive additional feedback. While I quietly listened in class and hoped that nobody would notice me or call on me, they raised their hands and participated in discussions with the professor and with their classmates. Instead of receiving grammar and sentence-related corrections and comments about needing to visit the ESL lab, they received feedback on their ideas and their well-written expositions. They didn’t ←86 | 87→interact with me in or outside the classroom, and I spent much time trying to work through my demoralizing experiences by talking with other international students. We were all unsure why we had been so excited and happy to be accepted to study at an American university, and we were wondering what it was about us that designated us as outsiders, incapable of learning, and unable to play by the rules. Maybe I should have returned to Austria. I had assumed that I would fit into the system seamlessly. Instead, the system was very different, and as a woman growing up in a working-class, rural community in Austria, I couldn’t figure out how to enter it.

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We never considered ourselves to be “at-risk” students, even though the institution and its teachers considered us a big risk. Being categorized as at-risk puts any failure—failure to pass a class, failure to graduate, failure to participate—on the student without acknowledging underlying exclusionary beliefs of the administration and faculty; culturally, socially, and politically situated contexts; and racist, sexist, homophobic, gendered, or xenophobic tendencies still in place at institutions of higher learning. This deficit model used for "fixing" us and fixing at-risk students in general creates a chasm that only deepens when the strategies used, as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux point out, are intended to "centralize federal power through the exercise of ideological hegemony" (1991, 8). Those who do not measure up to a tacit standard remain outside a system's particular behaviors and expectations. Our experiences as at-risk, "other," and outside the norm were demoralizing, and we struggled with understanding and making sense of our outsider status. We were, as Sara Ahmed put it, "positioned as the one[s]; who [are] not at home" (2012, 43), and if we wanted to stay, we needed to learn how to navigate an unjust and exclusionary system.

RISKING PARTICIPATION, FAILING TO FIT IN

To contrast the deficit model associated with at-risk students, Steven Bialostok and Robert Whitman (2012) address the push for risk-taking in educational settings, which, as they point out, is often associated with positive outcomes and is required in order to "acquire new skills, knowledge, and concepts" (1). Risk, then, is an inevitable part of education because, as Gert Biesta points out in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, the "students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility" (2016, 1). Education, according to Biesta, needs to involve risk in order to move "toward the freedom and independence of those being educated" (2).

The shift to a risk perspective as positive and inevitable in education is especially difficult for those who are seen as "at-risk" by the institution because of ←87 | 88→their socioeconomic status, their racial and ethnic backgrounds, or their language backgrounds. As students classified as "at risk" and seen as inferior, we often are reluctant to take "risks" and be a potential failure. We know that we don’t fit into a system which has historically operated under norms that privilege mainstream cultural principles and that exclude non-dominant populations. In her work on language and identity in U.S. settings, Susan Dicker points out that people in the U.S. are not only marked as “at-risk” based on their native languages but also based on the kinds of Englishes they speak. Standard English becomes the measure against which other varieties of English are measured. Dicker shows that Anglo-American college students’ evaluation of Latinos using Chicano English were negatively rated “on scales related to success, ability, and social awareness” (2003, 9), showing “the effect of cultural stereotyping on both majority—and minority-group members” (9).

Risk, then, is not an individual risk. Instead, as Juan Guerra argues in his discussion on performing in different discourse communities, the scholarship of non-dominant academics “almost always grows out of the twin desires to do our community a service and to do well for ourselves professionally and economically” (2004, 12). He continues to point out that, “while most of us are committed to the task of producing scholarship that depicts what we consider more relevant and respectful representations of our communities, we, too, are without question complicit in the same system of exploitation *and* beneficial recipients of the tainted fruits of our labor” (12). For non-dominant students and faculty who grew up in an environment where “the powers-that-be made every effort to smother the multiple languages, cultures, and social practices present in our varied communities so that they could not mix” (16), popular concepts of positive risk-taking are concepts that non-dominant communities are excluded from. The daily risks we take by “being there” as non-dominant participants in current educational settings, and the need to act in ways acceptable to our primary and secondary discourse communities—staying out of trouble, earning passing grades, achieving fruitful employment, and attaining social and economic movement—often discourages risk-taking. In other words, as non-dominant individuals we are constructed as “other” and “different” because our “normalness” contradicts accepted norms; as a result, our contributions are discounted, negated, and dismissed.

Why Did You Think You Belonged?—Nancy

The list of authors provided by the poetry professor, a believer in the superiority of rhyme and meter, included Gwendolyn Brooks. I chose Brooks for my final presentation because she was the only woman of color on the list, and because I wanted to learn more about her and her poetry.

I had studied poetry before, and I defined poets as photographers of literature because of the carefully designed language they use—whether free verse or rhyme and meter. I was confident of my research. I had found that Brooks was classically trained in rhyme and meter, and that she was challenged by young Black activists who dismissed the Pulitzer Prize-winning author (the first Black woman to hold this recognition) as “writing white.” Brooks, I learned, moved to free verse and increasingly focused on issues that affected the Black community. I also emphasized in my paper that Alice Walker wrote in her defense that rather than define traditional writing as “white,” Brooks represented a woman who successfully learned two different systems. Brooks’ free verse is stronger, I argued, because of her knowledge and ability to work with rhyme and meter. I then ended my reading with a quote from Brooks who claimed that free verse encouraged her voice, as a Black woman, during difficult times in the country.

I looked up for questions or comments. The professor, without looking at me, began attacking free verse. He transformed from an intellectual and slightly fumbly professor into an angry individual who believed that his professional authority was violated by my paper and my discussion of free verse as equivalent to rhyme and meter. Gwendolyn Brooks and Alice Walker were wrong, and my paper and course grades implied that I was too.

Why Did You Stay?—Sibylle

“Wait. Really? You don’t teach *German*? *Du unterrichtest Englisch*?” My American friends and acquaintances often assumed that as a native German speaker I would teach German. My family and friends in Austria also assumed that I would teach *Deutsch als Zweitsprache* to native English speakers. Speaking German and teaching English to native English speakers was as incompatible a concept to the Austrians as it was to the Americans.

My family in Austria expected to see me return to Austria after finishing my degree, and my PhD colleagues in the U.S. told me that I would have a hard time getting a job in rhetoric and composition programs in the U.S. as a non-Native speaker. They encouraged me to return to my home country and teach English language learners in Austria, or in any other country. One of my colleagues was more open about the reasons for me to leave: “There are plenty of us who need a job. We don’t need you to apply for a position that I could have.” As stunned as I was, I applied for jobs, was hired, and started teaching. I was willing to try it out.

As a young teacher, I never talked about where I was from because I wanted students to see me as a capable composition teacher and not as an English language learner whose experiences still made me doubt my abilities to teach composition to native speakers. I went into the classroom with many misgivings. I was ←89 | 90→afraid that one of the students would challenge my authority as a composition teacher. I was sure that my students would not accept the grades they received if they knew that I made mistakes in my own writing. And my fears were realized when a student asked about my accent, and when he wanted to know why he should accept a non-native speaker as his English teacher. “You can’t teach me anything,” he said. “I know more about English than you do. I’ve spoken it all my life.” It was true. I had an accent. I still messed up my prepositions from time to time. I wasn’t aware of Juan Guerra’s argument that every student and teacher “needs to develop a critical awareness about what language does, rather than what it is” (2016, 228). I wasn’t sure whether I had made the right decision. Maybe I should have gone home.

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We gave higher education a try, and we experienced moments of success and countless setbacks. We learned that what might work well in current institutions and organizations with students, teachers, scholars, or employees who arrive with and subscribe to the same social and cultural understanding of success and failure does not always work for us. Once we situate ourselves within localized social, economic, racial, and political communities, success and failure become part of these situated communities and are redefined by them. This means, for example, that a non-dominant student’s unsuccessful attempt to try out new theories and practices, generally a positive form of failure, can and often is interpreted through a popular lens as evidence of lacking ability and inattentiveness. Our own stories provide glimpses of these ideological battlegrounds, showing that the risks we took were seen by the institution as deficient and unacceptable to U.S. employment practices, even though we engaged in exploratory experimentation with academic knowledge and as diversifying our academic fields by including the perspectives of an American of color and an immigrant. The education system, and with it the people who benefit from it, however, saw us as not fitting in because we did not match the system’s normative knowledge.

REDEFINING RISK AND SUCCESS, PARTICIPATING IN EDUCATION

To encourage participation and success for non-dominant students in current educational settings, Anis Bawarshi explains, requires more than moving in and out of the academy. Instead, he tells us that we need to “teach our students how to become more rhetorically astute and agile” (2002, 19). To achieve such agility, Guerra proposes “transcultural repositioning,” a term that encourages all students and faculty, and especially those of non-dominant backgrounds, to take into ←90 | 91→account the shifting “situated literacies” which are part of our non-school lives, while at the same time encouraging and using the “language and literacies of power in the United States” without leading to a denial of their own socially and culturally situated literacies (2004, 14).

Guerra uses Fernando Ortiz’s definition of transculturation, which focuses on phases of transition:

> [T];he word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. In the end … the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them. (qtd. in Guerra 2004, 20–21)

To encourage transcultural repositioning in education requires students, teachers, and administrators to accept that the language of the majority has to be supplemented by the situated languages and literacies that students and teachers bring to the academic classroom (Eunjeong Lee and Suresh Canagarajah 2018; Guerra 2004, 2016). The resistance to accept diverse languages and cultural and social literacies, however, has a long history. As Dolores Delgado Bernal points out, “although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (2002, 106). The reason for devaluing or omitting non-dominant knowledge, according to Dolores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando, is that “higher education in the United States is founded on a Eurocentric epistemological perspective based on white privilege and ‘American democratic ideals’ of meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality. This epistemological perspective presumes that there is only one way of knowing and understanding the world, and it is the natural way of interpreting truth, knowledge, and reality” (2002, 171).

Bringing in a New Voice—Nancy

"I can design my scholarship to combine stories with cultural rhetoric? Will it be accepted?" I asked my dissertation advisor. The first time I was given an opportunity in higher education to connect my identity to what I was studying, I took full advantage of it. It provided a space for me, a bilingual woman, a traditional Chicanx and working-poor Los Angeles transplant to Houghton, Michigan, to study for my PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication. I spoke Spanish and English as one language, grew up as a Mexican Catholic, listened to Mariachi, ←91 | 92→Madonna, Luis Miguel, Michael Jackson, and Maná, read work by African-Americans, Latinx and Chicanx, Asians and Hapas, alongside Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Chaucer. I took art history courses focused on Europe and the Americas and studied conversational Japanese alongside Spanish and English. Blue tortillas were in, tacos with kimchi were new, and an Austrian chef gave us pizza that made sense. My parish was active and took on social issues while also allowing me to use the computer and to study. I joined protests against the war and against the power company, and I participated in the AIDS march. I chose to leave Los Angeles for my PhD to see how else people lived, and to see, as Sandra Cisneros said, whether it was true that we learn most about home and ourselves when we leave it.

Writing the early drafts of my narrative dissertation was the first time that writing in higher education was a pleasure while also providing new levels of stress. I knew that culturally specific contributions in a field where there are few such contributions either encourage others to engage or generate criticism because the work falls outside accepted boundaries. As a Latinx in rhetoric and professional writing in the 1980s and 90s, I had few role models to follow. I knew that I didn't want to speak for others, but I wanted to enter the conversation and create new spaces for Latinx who were part of an academic institution. I wanted to include them as an audience. I checked with a friend who grew up in my neighborhood to discuss my approach. I chose to write to two saints who are well-known in Mexican culture (La Virgen de Guadalupe y El Santo Niño de Atocha). I was confident moving forward with this project because I had support from my friends back home and from academics at the university. The academics encouraged my approach and advised me on how best to present a comprehensive argument in a bilingual way in a system that nurtures monolingualism and linear argumentation. Finally, I was able to participate in the scholarly community by publishing in *College Composition and Communication* where I pointed out that I saw my work as “an attempt to address the exclusivity of academic discourse, to encourage Latino students, parents, and community members to think about their perceptions of higher education, and to make mainstream academics aware of Latino students’ possible ways of seeing college, teachers, and students who are from outside their community” (Barrón 2003, 12).

Participating in Meaning Making—Sibylle

Standing outside and looking in to see whether there was room for the outsider—and to figure out how I would fit in—characterized part of the early stages of my academic career. I wanted to succeed, and I wanted to be part of a community of scholars and teachers who were successful in a U.S. educational system. All I knew was that I would never be able to claim insider status without a few caveats. My status as an English-as-a-second-language speaker, and my different cultural and ←92 | 93→social backgrounds always contributed to my otherness, in positive and negative ways. It was difficult for me to own my “otherness” and bring it into academic spaces. My ESL status, and the many teacher comments on my papers emphasizing either misunderstanding, a German-sounding sentence construction, or a preposition that was out of place, made me reluctant to bring in anything that would remind professors or students that I was a foreigner, an immigrant, an alien, an outsider.

Only later did I include my experiences into my scholarship, which very consciously announced “Reflective Practices of an Alien Researcher.” In the introduction to my research, I finally addressed my own status as an alien, an international, a foreigner, and an immigrant—identities that influenced how I approached scholarship. Drawing on Susan Leigh Star’s comment that “we are all marginal in some regard, because we are all members of more than one community of practice and thus of many networks" (1991, 90), I situated myself within a research agenda that looked at the multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory positions that non-dominant students occupied in academic settings. At the time when I self-disclosed in my research, I said "I know that like everybody else, I am constructed, named, and renamed constantly. I know that my identity is defined through a U.S. system of categorizing. But because I am an alien, I am not only seen as 'them'—I have too many questions that 'they' wouldn't have to ask—nor am I an easily defined 'other'—I am too invisible until I make myself visible. I don't know what my categories would or should be in this country" (Gruber 2007, 9). I also pointed out: "I am not done thinking through these complicated issues of nationality, race, culture, history, and experience. I have much to ask and much to learn" (10).

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To create new educational paradigms that support transcultural repositioning, Delgado Bernal advocates incorporating "culturally and linguistically relevant ways of knowing and understanding" to emphasize "the importance of rethinking the traditional notion of what counts as knowledge" (2002, 117). Delgado Bernal agrees with Francisca González who points out that educators need to "bring together understandings of epistemologies and pedagogies to imagine how race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality are braided with cultural knowledge, practices, spirituality, formal education, and the law" (2001, 643). With our work, we wanted to complicate and transform the mainstream "theorizing space" by "bringing in our own approaches and methodologies" (Anzaldúa 1990, xxv). She calls these new theories "*mestizaje* theories" because they "create new categories for those of us left out of or pushed out of existing ones" (xxvi).

The ability to consciously create new theories, and the rhetorical skill of transcultural repositioning, Guerra points out, "is one that members of our community must self-consciously regulate and not simply enact intuitively, if they wish to ←93 | 94→move back and forth with ease and comfort between and among different languages and dialects, different social classes, different cultural and artistic forms" (2004, 8). It took us many years to arrive at a point where we could exercise this skill and discuss and theorize our experiences as faculty of color and international faculty. We were in the same position as Michelle Hall Kells' bilingual Latinx students who, she points out, "are not cognizant of the ideological splitting that occurs when they begin to acquire the dominant discourse. Clearly, they sense some kind of division, a crossing over that separates them from their home culture; but few openly reflect on the impact of that split" (2002, 18). We too sensed that we didn't belong, and that by the standards of the academic institution, we were at risk of failing, but we could not name our "otherness," nor did we want to disappear. Now, some 20 years into our careers, we have learned to interlace our cultural capital with that of academia, and we have moved from our initial identities as "other"—devalued, omitted, and spoken for—to a new and still evolving stage that positions us within and outside academia, that takes parts of our social, cultural, political, and gendered identities and literacies and melds them with academic literacies to create new scholarship, new theories, and new pedagogies. We have survived, because, with Guerra, we believe that "we may yet chart our own destiny and ensure that everyone among us is granted the right to personal agency and self-determination" (2004, 8). We hope for a time when there is only "us," and when there no longer is such a thing as "the Other."

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SECTION II

Palpable Failures

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CHAPTER SEVEN

A Force of Disruption: Refusing the Success/ Failure Complex

ANNE DALKE

I. “FRAMING EVERYONE”: A SYSTEM OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

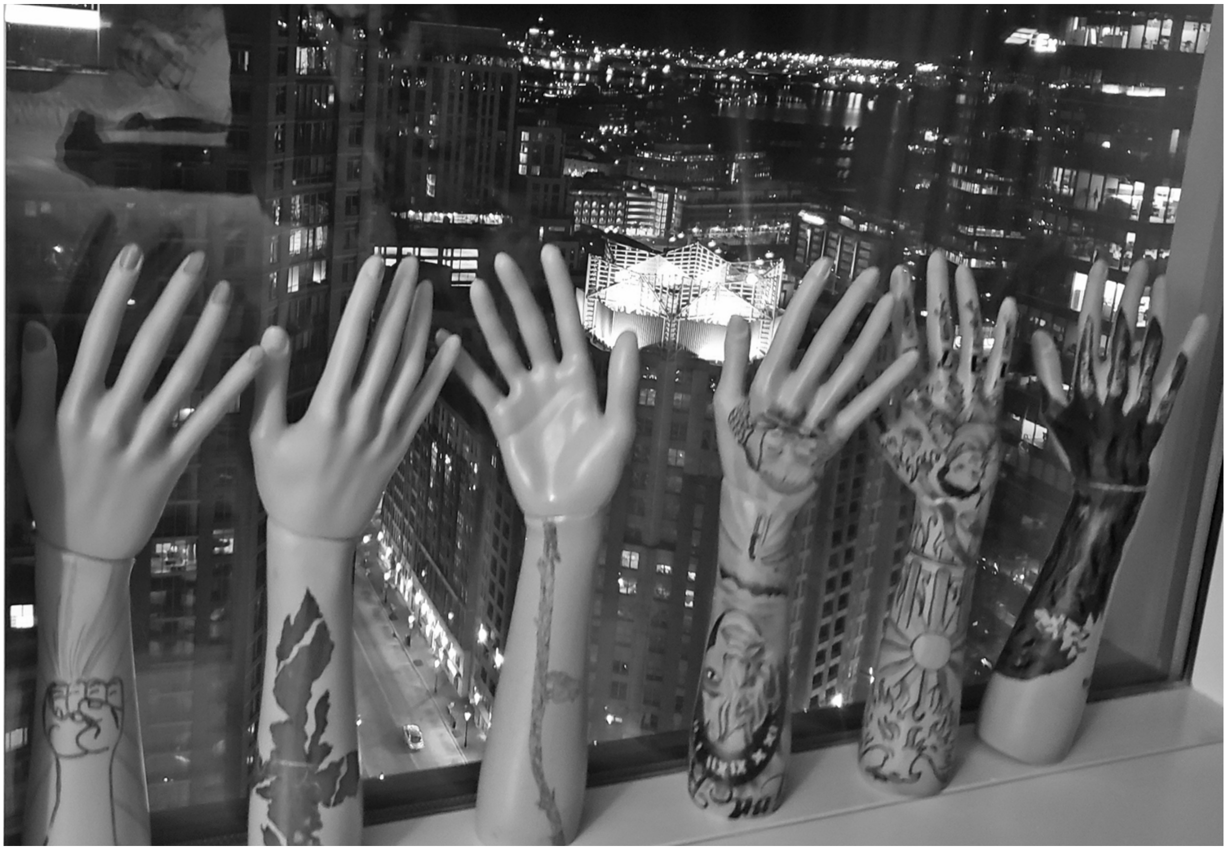


Figure 7.1: Hands in Baltimore. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

←99 | 100→

For the past ten years, I have been teaching inside jails and prisons in the Philadelphia area, *de facto* sites of social and individual failure against which the challenging learning of college education may well be measured. The story I have to tell about my work inside the walls begins within an institution outside of them.

For thirty-five years, I taught in the English Department at Bryn Mawr, an elite college serving young women who were both used to succeeding and terrified of failing. In 2014, I co-wrote an essay reflecting on disturbing dynamics in which high expectations of women's academic achievement are evaluated against the failures of those who do not or cannot measure up. The article, published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, describes the mental health costs of adhering to a narrative of "disabling achievement," challenges divisions separating those who achieved from those who failed, and offers in their place a narrative in which all of us operate on a spectrum of difficulty and possibility (Dalke and Mullaney 2014).

Colleges frequently advocate for failure as a route to success, an advanced version of a popular approach recommended by Jessica Lahey in *The Gift of Failure* (2016):

> Small failures, when the stakes are relatively low and the potential for emotional and cognitive growth is high, are … "desirable difficulties." Learning that comes with challenge is stored more effectively and more durably in the brain than learning that comes easily. (40)

At Bryn Mawr, where a student who struggled to meet the College's standards once described her professors as "another species of accomplishment and achievement" (Dalke and Mullaney 2014), staff and faculty attempt to counter students' disabling fear of failure by helping them learn to fail, and so to learn more effectively. I participated extensively in this process, quoting other authorities (Beckett 1983; Smith 2007) as I exhorted my students to participate in an ever-refining evolutionary process of "getting it less wrong" (Grobstein 1993).

College operations are guided by an orientation towards success, which is committed to supporting all students. "Small failures" are allowed, "desirable difficulties" encouraged, in a context in which the likelihood of success is seldom in doubt. Because students have a range of lived experiences and backgrounds—a quarter international citizens, a third domestic minorities, half on financial aid (Bryn Mawr 2019)—the prevailing discourse of "successful failure" both applies differentially and remains necessary. Despite the protected, ←100 | 101→privileged position of the college, and of the students who are fortunate enough to be enrolled there, advocating "every learning opportunity inherent in failure" (Lahey 2016, 44) is still a hard sell, because the need to succeed is so great, the fear of failure so strong.

More profoundly, what the discourse of "successful failure" fails to acknowledge is the degree to which embracing failure as a route to success reifies the structure of achievement. Encouraging students to be more resilient in demanding circumstances shores up a system that defines "the territory of excellence” as “very small”: “Only a few will be allowed to gain the peaks.… [T];he rest … are made to … feel like losers. The words ‘success,’ ‘achievement,’ and ‘accomplishment’ have been defined in such a way as to leave most people and most types of life out of the picture” (McIntosh 1983, 6, 8).

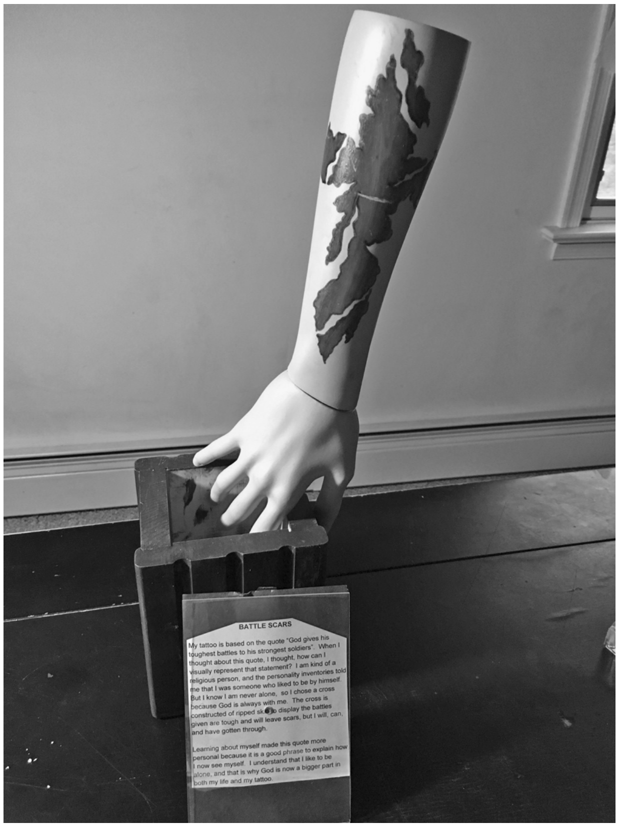
The educational anthropologists Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott (1998), who characterize this dynamic as “the success/failure complex,” identify it as “the problem American schooling faces”:

> Failure allows for the definition of success, and together they frame everyone.… [E];xplanations of either … are really parts of the justification and rationalization of the workings of this structure.… [I]n American education, everyone must do better than everyone else. Of course, this is both logically and social structurally impossible. (4, 12)

Róisín O’Gorman and Margaret Werry (2012) also demonstrate how “failure is endemic” in pedagogy, “the defining condition under which … not just students but also teachers and institutions … operate.” O’Gorman and Werry go so far as to describe the “fetishization of excellence” as “an instrument of structural violence—to make successes of students, schools must winnow out the failures” (2–3).

As many researchers have demonstrated, youth marked as “failures” in school often leave that institution, and those who drop out are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than those who graduate from high school. In this country, those failures are consistently marked in racial terms: “African-American elementary school children … receive more disciplinary infractions than children from other racial categories” (Rocque and Paternoster 2011, 633); African American high-schoolers “are much more likely than their white counter-parts to be suspended or expelled from school for disciplinary reasons” (Heitzeg 2009, 11). Once ensnared in the prison industrial complex, youth are again subject to forms of “structural violence” akin to those they first encountered in school (Schept, Wall and Brisman 2015).

II. “STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE”: MOVING FROM THE PRIVILEGE INDUSTRY TO THE PUNISHMENT INDUSTRY



BATTLE SCARS

My tattoo is based on the quote “God gives his
toughest battles to his strongest soldiers”. When I
thought about this quote, I thought, how can I
visually represent that statement? I am kind of a
religious person, and the personality inventories told
me that I was someone who liked to be by himself.
But I know I am never alone, so I chose a cross
because God is always with me. The cross is
constructed of ripped sk[illegible]o display the battles
given are tough and will leave scars, but I will, can,
and have gotten through.

Learning about myself made this quote more
personal because it is a good phrase to explain how
I now see myself. I understand that I like to be
alone, and that is why God is now a bigger part in
both my life and my tattoo.

Figure 7.2: Battle Scars. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

In sharp contrast to the discourse of success in colleges like Bryn Mawr, prisons assume failure. A number of theorists have traced the ways in which this dynamic is co-constitutive. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) argue that the “university … is not the opposite of the prison, since they are both involved … with the reduction and command of the social individual.… [T];he university produces incarceration as the product of its negligence.… [M]ore universities promote more jails” (41–42). Dismissing the call for “schools not jails” as a corruption of earlier exhortations to offer “education not incarceration,” Damien Sojoyner (2013) similarly revises the myth of the school to prison pipeline, arguing that harsh school discipline, a technology of control that attempts to turn students into “model, subservient citizens,” trains them to comply with the rules of the prison industrial ←102 | 103→complex (242, 244, 250). Abraham Bolish (2014) also describes the work of universities and prisons as interrelated, much like the way Varenne and McDermott describe success and failure. “The regimes governing the spaces inside the campus and the prison,” Bolish explains, serve “inversely related functions.” The “discourse of ‘dropout’/‘graduate’ ” offer individuals two possible future trajectories: “[E]ither going ‘up’ as a valued graduate toward economic productivity or ‘down’ as a ‘dropout’ toward criminality.”

During my last five years at Bryn Mawr, I co-facilitated a reading and writing group at a women’s jail in Philadelphia. Each semester, my colleague Jody Cohen and I took Bryn Mawr students into Riverside Correctional Facility, where we encountered profound experiences of the other end of the “success/failure system.” The Bryn Mawr students who participated were predominately, like Jody and me, white, female, and middle-to-upper class; the incarcerated students were mostly black, female, and poor. These demographics, however, were more nuanced than they might first appear. A few of our incarcerated students were white, well-educated, from families of means. The college students who took the lead in designing and guiding our class sessions included a Latina who was on full scholarship, an Asian woman who was self-funded, an African immigrant whose social class rank was higher in her home country than in the U.S.

Unlike colleges that challenge students to prepare for success, prisons are ripe for exploiting the possibilities of failure. Daniel Karpowitz (2017) critiques the degrading assumptions of incapacity, the “bigotry of low expectations” and “low ambitions” that can operate in prison education programs (24, 170). In disturbing testimony, some college students report that they feel less pressure to perform inside the walls, luxuriating

> in an expansive sense of inside time. They tell me how much they look forward to their Friday afternoons in prison. A student in her first semester with our program says she feels more “relaxed” in prison … than at the college, where she’s losing a power struggle with a

> professor. A friend with decades of experience teaching inside says similarly that she “loves being in jail,” where the expectations are lower than in the academy. (Dalke 2019)

This was not the case for all. Being in the jail was particularly difficult for some students of color who had family and friends who were incarcerated, and were themselves needled by correctional officers to behave—“or end up wearing green.”

I know less about how the inside students experienced our sessions and am hesitant to speak for them. They read essays about a wide range of women’s experiences, including those of abuse and incarceration; wrote essays reflecting on their own experiences; and sometimes read them aloud to us. They did not revise these—in part, I think, because of issues with self-esteem; also in part because they were incarcerated in a city jail, where most stays were brief. Outside our classroom ←103 | 104→were ever-revolving doors: frequently scheduled evaluations, hearings, trials, sentencings, as well as constant negotiations with family and friends who lived nearby.

This meant that, from week to week, a completely different group would gather, some not having yet received the book we’d assigned; others having read only a small portion; still others having eagerly read—and coming to class eager to discuss—the whole text. So Jody and I developed a flexible approach, often reading a single paragraph aloud, for instance, as a shared starting point.

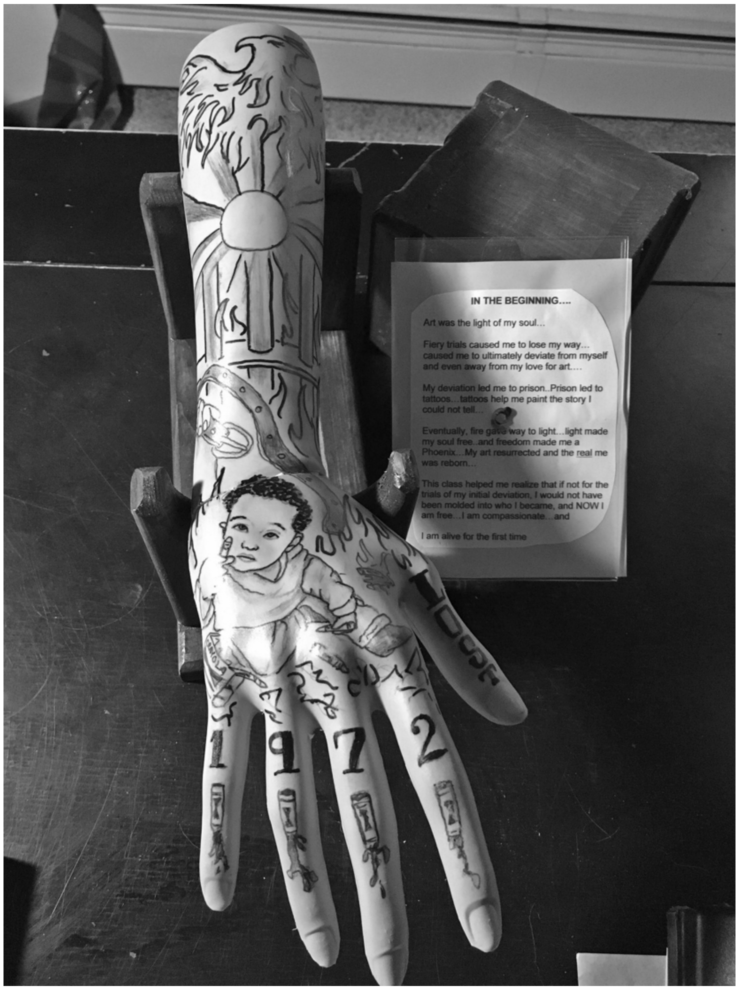
With expectations continually in flux, Jody and I found that individual performance was not “on the table” in the jail the same way it was in our college classrooms. We let go of our ambition to convert the book group into a credit-bearing course, once we realized that it would limit access for women who did not have GEDs, or who were not eligible for college admission or loans. We came to recognize that most of the inside students did not think of themselves as scholars and came to appreciate their different ways of being in class: not enacting success—but not enacting failure, either.

Most of us respected and learned from one another’s insights. Exploring our shared sense of the relationship of the readings to our lives helped make us present to one another. At the time, I lacked useful language, not having yet learned, for example, about the path-breaking work of Asao Inoue (2015) on assessing writing for a “socially just future.” But I now realize that the fluid dynamics of our book group frequently enabled participants to step aside from the paradigm of success and failure, a process that, as Inoue acknowledges, is difficult in conventional college courses, which are so insistently structured around practices of assessing “quality” (84).

And then came my retirement, what Stacy Bell McQuaide (2019) calls moving from “the privilege industry to the punishment industry”—from working with relatively affluent, mostly white students, assumed to be on track for “success,” to working largely with poorer students of color who are already socially marked as “failures.” With training from the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (which brings students from campuses and prisons together for semester-long courses in correctional settings) and The Petey Greene Program (which provides individualized tutoring for people who are incarcerated), I volunteer as a writing tutor in Inside-Out classes offered by colleagues from various colleges in the Philadelphia area. I join the weekly class sessions in prison, direct some of the exercises, read and respond to the writing of students who are incarcerated, and return a second day each week to help them work, individually and in small groups, on their reading and writing skills.

That prisons are sites of both structural and individual failure must surely be central to any pedagogy that takes place inside. What do reading, writing, thinking, teaching, tutoring have to offer at a site where failure is expected, where little ←104 | 105→works to affirm or encourage? I reflect specifically here on a pair of linked questions in the call for proposals for this volume: “Who is allowed to fail?” “Is permission to fail granted unevenly across social locations?” I ask what this project of *Failure Pedagogies* stands to learn from those who have been dismissed as failures before class even begins.

III. DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS AND FOR FAILURE: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANCE THROUGH TATTOO ART



IN THE BEGINNING....

Art was the light of my soul...

Fiery trials caused me to lose my way... caused me to ultimately deviate from myself and even away from my love for art....

My deviation led me to prison..Prison led to tattoos...tattoos help me paint the story I could not tell...

Eventually, fire gave way to light...light made my soul free..and freedom made me a Phoenix....My art resurrected and the real me was reborn...

This class helped me realize that if not for the trials of my initial deviation, I would not have been molded into who I became, and NOW I am free...I am compassionate...and

I am alive for the first time

Figure 7.3: In the Beginning…. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

In Fall 2018, I volunteered as a writing tutor for a new course entitled "Social Construction of Deviance Through Tattoo Art," being offered for the first time at State Correctional Facility-Chester, a medium security prison for men. The class was designed by Lauren Barrow, Associate Professor at Chestnut Hill College, ←105 | 106→who had a profound vision. Recognizing that most of the incarcerated students had limited, vexed experiences with schooling, Lauren designed the class for them to succeed, building it, as she explained, “so that no student would be less qualified than another.” Rather than formal essays, the final projects would be visual: tattoos on plastic arms, displayed first at our concluding ceremony inside the prison, then at Chestnut Hill College and a national criminal justice conference (See Figure 7.1).

The incarcerated students in this class, like those at Riverside, were mostly poor people of color. Chestnut Hill students have a median family income that is half that of Bryn Mawr families; three-fourths come from domestically diverse populations (Chestnut Hill College 2019). Many of the outside students in our class were first generation; one was a veteran. Focusing on a form of art that has long been judged not “fine,” but rather an insistent mark of being deviant and “unschooled,” Lauren conceived a course that enabled inside and outside students of all races and class backgrounds to enter as equals, even as experts.

In accord with the pedagogical aims of the Inside-Out program, key to Lauren’s vision was the development of relationships among inside and outside students. Students were expected to learn from each other’s creative and critical processes. These were initiated with get-acquainted questions, accentuated by a poetic exercise called “Where I’m From,” reinforced by multiple opportunities for one-on-one conversations. The syllabus also asked students to read journal articles that explored and challenged conventional social norms and presented paradigm shifts in thinking: from the ancient history of tattooing (Lineberry 2007); through the relationship of tattoos to deviance, including claims of personality disorders (Adams 2009, Post 1969) and of stigma, especially in the courtroom (Martin and Dula 2010, Funk and Todorov 2013); ending with the contemporary art world’s embrace of the “positive deviance” of tattoos (Irwin 2003).

When Lauren first proposed her topic to prison administrators, a Deputy Superintendent reported that they found it “cringeworthy.” “Encouraging tattooing is not what we do in prison,” he said; “we write people up for this.” A review of the syllabus, with its focus on the history and symbolism of an art form, eventually convinced administrators that the topic, although controversial, constituted a course worth offering inside.

And yet, from the very first week, as one administrator acknowledged, “we had headaches and hiccups.” Bureaucratic obstacles are endemic in prison education, but this semester Lauren’s careful design for success seemed in particularly sharp tension with a countervailing design for failure. Prison rules often flummoxed class participants and the prison administrators who assisted us. The usual delays slowed our getting inside; we faced a number of additional tough ←106 | 107→restrictions. Surveillance was much more rigorous than it had been in the past. Due to a statewide lockdown, classes began late. Heightened security at the prison—an attempt to limit the influx of drugs—prevented us from bringing in pens, paper and books. We had no access to lesson plans, class lists, attendance records. An art historian who spoke to the class was denied access to her illustrations.

The college students could not bring the readings inside, which constrained our careful discussion of texts. They also couldn’t bring in their journals, which prevented them from sharing their writing. I was not allowed to remove and return the journals of the incarcerated students, so had to use class time to scribble my responses to their writing. Because the plastic arms presented a particular security threat, we were required to hold class in the visitors’ lounge. This meant that, both before and after each class session, the incarcerated students were required to undergo scans and full body searches.

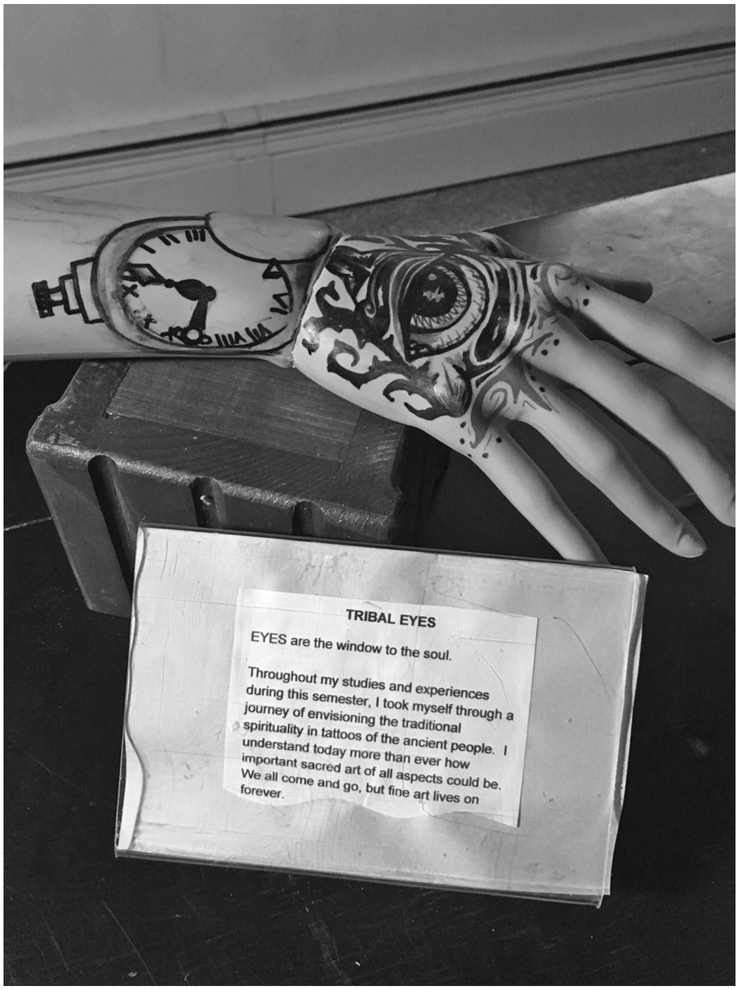
The security procedures cut considerably into our allotted class time. They also reinforced the fundamentally different realities of outside and inside students, accentuating the insult of failure among the latter. One of them observed that the body searches deterred people from learning. He felt cheated, cut off from “the chance to co-exist a little more. I was irked—really pissed off—whenever I came in.” It seemed as if the restrictions, regulations, absence of communication and prison bureaucratic process were turning our class into a farce of what education might be.

And yet, we persisted. Perhaps we accomplished more because the situation was so dire. Weekly, Lauren devised new work-arounds. She wrote her lesson plans on the palm of her left hand—these eventually spread, in multiple colors, to include her fingers and arm—in hilarious anticipation of the tattooing she assigned later in the semester. She also enlisted the capable assistance of the prison's Director of Activities, who photocopied readings, actively participated herself in the classes, even intervened when other officials tried to initiate additional security measures.

In the end, despite multiple frustrations, Lauren, the students and I were able to realize much of the initial class plan. Ongoing self-reflection constituted a particularly strong strand of the course, as students reconsidered their own perceptions, moving back and forth from academic understandings to emergent understandings of selves. Drawing on multiple personality inventories, the students began to recognize traits they had not considered before, and turned these into images, sketching dimensions of themselves they might not otherwise offer in conversation, then writing explanations for their choices.

The challenge of the last task made clear the ways in which this course—carefully designed for success, persistently bedeviled by failure—also risked, like so ←107 | 108→many classes before it, becoming mired in "the success/failure complex" (Varenne and McDermott, 4). But the multiple ways in which the students responded to the challenge also demonstrated how a college course in prison might be particularly positioned to sidestep the educational and incarceral bureaucracies that uphold the conventional success/failure binary. I now understand this course neither as a successful design that failed, nor as a failure en route to success, but rather as disrupting the traditions of academic achievement deeply grounded in an interlocking system of failure and success—and as doing so inside the walls created by failure.

IV. REFUSING THE TERMS: A FORCE OF DISRUPTION



TRIBAL EYES

EYES are the window to the soul.

Throughout my studies and experiences during this semester, I took myself through a journey of envisioning the traditional spirituality in tattoos of the ancient people. I understand today more than ever how important sacred art of all aspects could be. We all come and go, but fine art lives on forever.

Figure 7.4: Tribal Eyes. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

An ongoing challenge for those of us teaching inside is the question of how complicit we are in the prison industrial complex. Do our classes help to socialize ←108 | 109→incarcerated students into conformity? Are we raising expectations that cannot be met? "Social Construction of Deviance in Tattoo Art" refused, at least in part, the central terms which dominate angst-filled discussions about linear progression and its negation. In this class, we took several steps aside that did not lead back into the success/failure complex, but rather towards a different, more disruptive kind of education, one J. Jack Halberstam (2011) calls thinking "anew … the site of failure and unbecoming conduct" (144–145).

Halberstam (2013) urges “a mode of thinking with others” that improvises on conventional understandings of “rights and respectability” (12); in class, we often thought together about making such choices. For instance, many incarcerated students—having experienced discrimination both for facial tattoos and for being poor men of color—were deeply disturbed by an essay about the criminal stereotypes that facial tattoos activate in the courtroom (Funk and Todorov 2013). The article generated a lively debate, which surfaced repeatedly during the semester: Would any of us be willing to hire a tattooed lawyer? Some inside students said they would “select a lawyer based on his track record,” while others argued against “sharing social stereotypes” and for “the perspective of change”; they felt that “a facial tat does not affect what’s going on mentally.” Several others said that they would never hire a lawyer with visible tattoos, because they “did not underestimate the bias of judges and juries.” One participant observed that “the competency of the lawyer is irrelevant”; what matters is the courtroom bias against tattoos—and ongoing discrimination against black people. At the end of the semester, the story of Mark Gonzalez, a newly elected District Attorney in South Texas who has a full body tattoo (Jouvenal 2018), offered a vivid answer to our much-discussed question, as Lauren invited us all to “imagine a good attorney with a facial tattoo not as a rebel, but as a pioneer.”

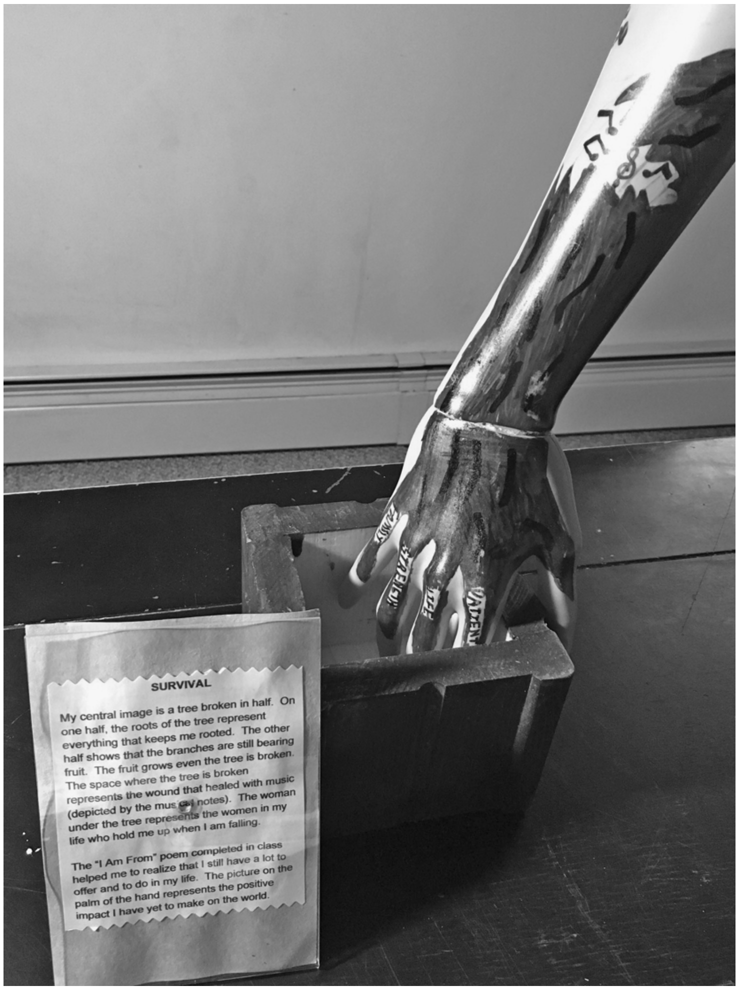
We also tried re-writing the script of success closer to home. In our final reading assignment, Katherine Irwin (2003) describes the “tattoo pursuits” of artists and collectors “as a reflection of their deep, lifelong commitment to rejecting normal society,” choosing to embrace a marginalized identity and status rather than to succeed on any conventional level (34, 38, 40). Several outside students found this position resonant: “I don’t like mainstream culture”; “I see the appeal of rejecting the norm”; “I want to be weird and bizarre”; “I don’t want to get rid of the oddity factor.” Several of the inside students also questioned the requirement that they perform for a larger public, suggesting that they didn’t trust others to interpret their work: “Why does everything need to be explained? I’m a personal person”; “My tattoos express me. I don’t tell my business. I’m an introvert”; “Classifying the meaning can limit the scope of the tattoos. Why can’t people just get tattoos because they like them? It might be more freeing not to explain what they mean”; “This is why I am confused. You want me to draw a ←109 | 110→tattoo that is very personal, but then you want me to explain it. And I don’t want to put that out there.”

Other inside students offered a strong counter-argument about the need to tell these stories as a means of moving beyond stigma: “You got your tattoos for the world to see!”; “Labeling and classification helps others understand and appreciate the tattoos”; “The only reason we have these stereotypes is ignorance. If others could see the stories, they would be better able to receive the message.” The students’ final assignment, eight to ten sentences explaining the meaning of their tattoos to others, affirmed this line of thinking.

The students wrestled with using their tattoos to assert what was important to them personally (“displaying something from yourself that you wouldn’t say verbally,” as Lauren put it). Did they want to embrace the paradigm shift described in some of the articles, by making the private public? Revealing the meaning of their tattoos to others could mean mainstreaming what would otherwise be seen as marginal. Would that cost them more than resisting the invitation, and so cause them to remain socially marginalized? Would they enact this resistance by refusing the writing assignment? Which of them could afford to risk social deviance? Might they be differently marked, by race, class, education, experience of incarceration?

Invoking my privilege as the author of this essay, I choose not to explain the photographs of most of the tattoos. In refusing explicit labels, I invite my readers to respond in a non-directed way. While “validating the tension” between the options of explaining one’s work and refusing to do so, Lauren made a different choice for the course’s finale: “This is why we invite visitors to view the outcome of the course: explaining ourselves expresses our responsibility to others.” When administrators from the college, the prison and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange arrive for our closing ceremony, they admired the tattoos, and found that they could not distinguish between the inside and outside students' work, which was unsigned, and so remained largely anonymous.

It was especially appropriate that the course, focused on the creative, transgressive art of tattooing, ended by weighing the tension between the costs of positive and negative deviance. It was equally appropriate that students' varied responses to that tension illustrated the ways in which our course was also working to sidestep both failure and success. Most of the students completed the assignment, on the terms we stipulated, by placing their evolving understanding of themselves within the history of tattooing. Most of them reported finding the tasks of drawing and describing their tattoos to be self-affirming. Perhaps the most powerful demonstration that Lauren's aspirations for the course had been fulfilled was a tattoo showing a tree, broken in half, still bearing fruit.



SURVIVAL

My central image is a tree broken in half. On one half, the roots of the tree represent everything that keeps me rooted. The other half shows that the branches are still bearing fruit. The fruit grows even the tree is broken. The space where the tree is broken represents the wound that healed with music (depicted by the musical notes). The woman under the tree represents the women in my life who hold me up when I am falling.

The "I Am From" poem completed in class helped me to realize that I still have a lot to offer and to do in my life. The picture on the palm of the hand represents the positive impact I have yet to make on the world.

Figure 7.5: Survival. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

←110 | 111→

Because of the social norms evoked by the final assignment, however, some of the inside students resisted meeting its terms. In telling them to create labels for their artwork, Lauren was asking them to justify their designs. Making the meaning of their tattoos explicit was fraught for several students, impoverished, imprisoned black men who—wanting to be free themselves—preferred their art to be free of written language, to speak for itself.

Perhaps the clearest example of this conflict occurred when the youngest of these students designed a tattoo that included a gun, violent language, and references to gang activity. Told by the prison administration that this was not suitable for public presentation, the student did not, at first, want to create a replacement. I understood this as his clear refusal to be socialized by the educative process (cf. Harney and Moten 2013; Sojoyner 2013). That is, I believed he was not engaging in a process of aesthetic selection that censored his expression. His position seemed to resemble that of the tattoo artists who refused to pay the cost of being heralded by the world of mainstream art (Irwin 2003).

So I was surprised when, at the closing ceremony, the student revealed a new tattoo of a man wearing a suit and tie, carrying a briefcase, and looking at himself ←111 | 112→in a mirror that read “Leader/Change/Respected/Protected/Ambitious/Loving/Intelligent”.

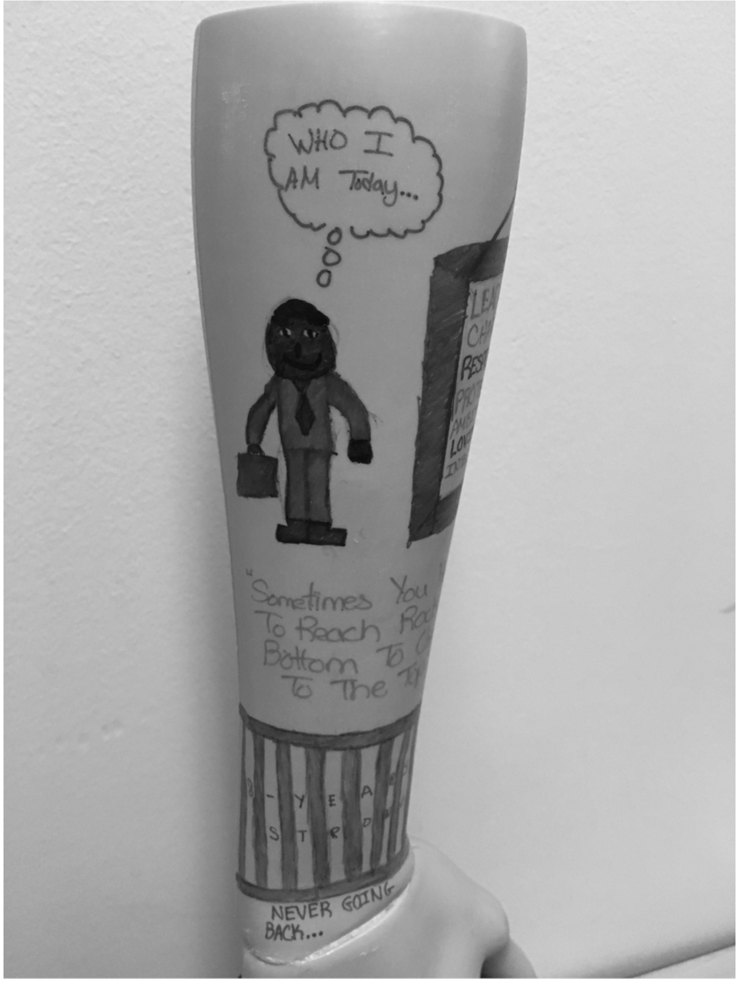


Figure 7.6: Who I Am Today. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

Was this, as the student explained to me, visualizing a desire, "the story about who I can become"? Was it, instead, an ironic response to the requirement that he make his work more acceptable to prison administrators and visitors at our final session? Or was it a statement of his commitment to a class that—despite the humiliation of weekly strip searches and a final call to social conformity—celebrated a hard-fought stand against stereotypical assumptions?

I'm not sure. I am sure, though, that—in exposing the kinds of pedagogical moves and questions that made the structure of our class visible—this ambiguous story raises questions both of censure (whose images are credible? whose are erased?) and of possibility. It gestures towards a space that cannot be defined simply by success or failure. So does the response of another student, who responded to the writing assignment by sidestepping it entirely, characterizing himself as a “Man of Few Words, who has a lot to say … but says nothing”.

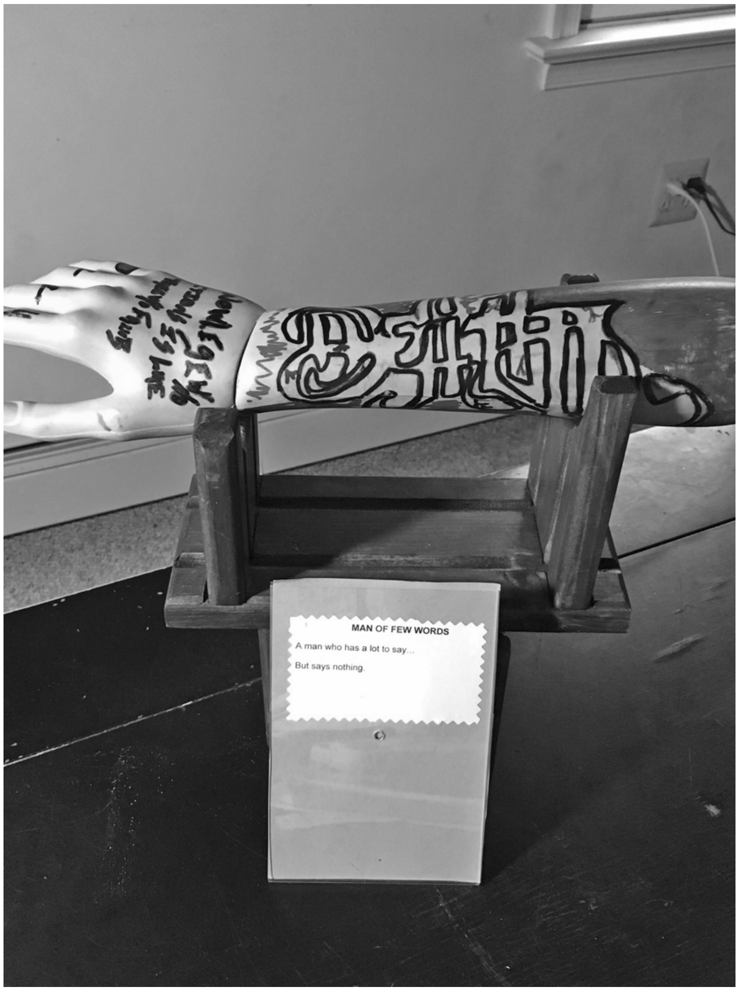


Figure 7.7: Man of Few Words. Source: Lauren Barrow. Printed with Permission. Copyright 2018

←112 | 113→

I doubt that any academic class, with its built-in structures of evaluation, can completely escape the framework of success and failure so intrinsic to educational structures. I admire the degree to which scholars such as Inoue are beginning to push against those frames. Our prison course offered an alternative form of education, in which we collaborated to replace the binary perceptions of success and failure with a circular pattern of shifting social attitudes, enacting together how fluid the relationship to stigma can be. In doing so, our class disrupted the educational and incarceral bureaucracies which surrounded, upheld and attempted to subvert it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude to The Petey Greene Program and Inside-Out Prison Exchange, for offering me the opportunity and structure for doing this work. Particular thanks to Lauren Barrow, who envisioned this course, invited me to join her, both in facilitating and reflecting on it, and who also created the photographic archive. Many ←113 | 114→thanks also to other fellow travelers on this path: all the students, inside and out, as well as colleagues—Jody Cohen, Kaye Edwards, Alice Lesnick, Joel Schlosser, Emma Sindelar, Michael Tratner—who responded to drafts of this article, and so assisted me in understanding what we are doing when we teach and learn on the inside.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Who Survives the Witch Hunt? Supporting Our Students in a Process We Know Will Fail Them

SHARI J. STENBERG AND STACEY WAITE

The findings are returned. *There has been no violation according to Title IX*.

As teachers of composition, we participate in many systems we already know will fail. Most of us give students grades, despite knowing that grades do not reflect our students' writing or their value; we know grades do not help them learn to write. Most of us select texts for students to read, despite knowing that our selections will fail to spark their curiosity or passion, and despite knowing it is their curiosity and passion that will educate them. Almost all of us work within institutional constraints, and we know that institutions often fail us—setting up assessment practices that don't work, underpaying contingent faculty and graduate students. We know that the institution, as a system, does not enact complexity (only efficiency); we know it does not truly value process (only tidy outcomes); and we know that the institution (any institution) is always motivated to protect itself. In the contexts in which we work, we come to expect failure. But we do the work, imagining our classrooms and relationships with students to sometimes (even if only momentarily) escape the failures of the institution. Sometimes, though, the failures are too great, the harm too real to forgive ourselves for our own participation.

In September of 2017, United States Secretary of Education Betsy Devos made the public statement that Title IX "terrifies" colleges and is a "failed system" of "kangaroo courts" (Svrluga and Anderson 2017). It terrifies us, too, both to agree with Betsy Devos on Title IX as a failed enterprise and to have experienced the failure of Title IX ourselves.

Imagine you are a first-time WPA. Imagine you have scheduled a meeting with a student in a writing class that you expect will be like any other—maybe she hates her TA because he's a leftist, maybe she believes her grades are unfair, maybe the instructor isn't returning their papers. Instead it's something else. And [redacted] different students tell it to you, and they show you [redacted] and each of them is nervous. One cries. And you call your mentor, who is your friend, and you do the things the institution asks you to do. You call Title IX—it is a place you call, not a human being, though a human being will answer when you call.

October 2017 *New York Times* headline: “Woody Allen Warns of ‘Witch Hunt’ Over Weinstein Then Tries to Clarify” (Chow 2017).

The Journal of Educational Leadership published a case study intended to spark discussion about whether a high school history teacher calling his female students “baby cakes” and “sweetheart” constitutes sexual harassment or academic freedom. The teacher in the case study, Mr. Byrd, responds to his principal, “I have always called students ‘babycakes’ and no one has complained before. This is an infringement on my academic freedom and a violation of my First Amendment rights” (Ziegler 2005, 60). The case study encourages educators to discuss their perspectives on Mr. Byrd’s behavior.

Eighty percent of those accused of witchcraft in 16th and 17th Century Europe were women. In Medieval Russia, 95% were women. Most of those hunting and presiding over inquisitions were men (Cassese 2018). Who were the hunted?

Imagine you are a college student. Imagine your professor, more sophisticated than that Mr. Byrd, calls you “love” and reads to you from canonical literature for what feels like an excessive amount of time in office hours. Imagine you are confused about whether you are compelled or repelled. Imagine you live in a culture that does not teach you the difference. Imagine Professor “Love” has been saying “love” since the 70’s and “no one has complained before.”

On Sept. 7, 2017, DeVos pledged to replace the “failed system” of sexual assault enforcement. The Obama administration’s recommendation that schools use a “preponderance of the evidence” to evaluate sexual misconduct cases, she charges, has “weaponized the Office for Civil Rights.” The Obama administration fueled a witch hunt (Svrluga and Anderson 2017).

The findings are returned. There has been no violation according to Title IX.

Imagine there are several [redacted] who do *not* believe you should have called Title IX. Imagine [redacted] tells you those men say you [redacted] are on a “witch hunt.” Imagine during the investigation you received a copy of Laura Kipnis’ (2017) *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* in ←118 | 119→your campus mailbox. You know the book. It’s been quoted to you before. You try to calm yourself in the mailroom. Surely it is a coincidence.

Kipnis’ book is seductive itself, convincing us it is “feminist” of us and “hip” even to accept professor/student romantic relationships as consensual and inevitable. It is even part of young women’s empowerment, she suggests. Kipnis wants to argue that institutions are overreaching with their policies on relationships of this kind. If Kipnis’ book is about Title IX’s “overreaching” as a failure, what can we make of its gross “underreaching”? We know we work in the confines of failing institutional operations, but what do we do when those failures are dangerous rather than just unfortunate or annoying? How do we teach students to navigate these failing structures? How do we teach them to survive?

David L. Stader and Jodi L. Williams-Cunningham (2017) outline the ways that these failures are betrayals—of our students, of ourselves. They write, “There have been several recent lawsuits against colleges for institutional betrayal. Most of these suits claim that the college violated Title IX by being deliberately indifferent to sexual victimization claims” (201). The indifference, of course, is by design and often positioned as “fairness” to the accused. But isn’t it fair, isn’t it reasonable for a student to expect certain educational rights—the right to think, read, and work without being hit on, for example? Should we be teaching students extra-institutional literacies? Is there more for us to do? Do we need first year-writing courses that “cover” what options exist for the moment your political science TA wants to help you with your essay at his house on Friday night?

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Imagine you are asked whether you “covered” the topic of sexual relationships between students and instructors in the Graduate TA training. Imagine you provide a syllabus for the pedagogy course. You highlight the week about “boundaries” with students. Imagine it beginning: the feeling that this is *your* failure.

Michelle D. Brock (2017) writes, “The use of the term ‘witch hunt’ by men in positions of power is not only historically negligent, but dangerous. It diminishes and … dismisses a tragic history in which tens of thousands of individuals, in Colonial America and across Europe, lost their lives. More glaringly, it attempts to negate obvious power dynamics by casting those in positions of dominance as victims of systematic injustice that they have never actually experienced.”

Imagine you hear one story, two stories, three (more) stories of students who trusted, like you once did, the sanctuary of the space between the teacher and the student. Imagine hearing these students wonder aloud whether the violation was their fault. Worrying, like you once did, about what would happen if they reported, needing and fearing repercussion. Imagine looking to the institution for clarity. ←119 | 120→Furiously typing search terms like sexual relationships between teacher and student, instructor violation of student, sexual harassment, instructor sexual misconduct. Imagine turning up nothing.

September 2018: The Republican party sends out an email blast asking their supporters to “Stop the Kavanaugh Witch Hunt.” Senator Lindsey Graham asks a Kavanaugh protester: “Why don’t we dunk him in the water and see if he floats?” Kavanagh is a confirmed Supreme Court Justice.

The findings are returned. *There has been no violation according to Title IX*.

Imagine [redacted] a shares that you have been characterized as “off the feminist rails” by a colleague.

In *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan England*, Elizabeth Reis (1999) describes “Salem” as an American cultural icon: “The trials have become a metaphor for hysterical persecution, unfounded accusations, and confessions that have no reasonable explanation” (10).

Rahimi and Liston (2010) summarize their study of sexual harassment in education environments in their article in *Gender and Education*: “Our findings in this current study concluded that many of the teachers with whom we spoke offered examples of what we would define as sexual harassment, but did not themselves define them as such. Perhaps one of the first steps in addressing sexual harassment is revisiting common presumptions of what sexual harassment is” (802).

Imagine you are told not to discuss any aspect of the Title IX investigation or even that there is one. Imagine there have been implied legal consequences for you talking to friends or colleagues about this event.

What made a woman a witch? In the early modern period: gender nonconformity. Ambition (Lock Her Up!). Overt displays of sexuality. In the McCarthy era: Keeping one’s maiden name. “Needlessly” working for pay while married. Having a “dominating personality” (Cassese 2018). Today, writes Erin Cassese (2018), “our modern witch hunts are often invoked defensively by men in positions of power and authority. Recent events show that men with political and economic power can often rely on the idea of witch hunts to work for them, not against them. The witch hunt still uses institutional authority to enforce traditional gender norms and power relations.”

Imagine the invasive ring of your office phone. The Title IX investigator wants to hear the student’s story, as it was reported to you. This is not your first time relaying a violation. Of course it is not. You take out your notes; mechanically, you retell a story that is not yours. You wait for the question you know is coming: Did she describe the incident as consensual? Your chest constricts. *Consent is complicated by ←120 | 121→the power dynamic*, you say. *Excuse me?* she says. *There is a power dynamic between a student and a teacher. In those situations, consent is compromised.* The investigator meets you with silence, then moves to the next question. Imagine that you know you have failed, that this will all fail.

The findings are returned. *There has been no violation according to Title IX*.

We know much about the rates of sexual misconduct and gender-related violence on college campuses; we know very little about the investigation, adjudication and outcomes of sexual misconduct cases on college campuses. Psychologist Tara N. Richards (forthcoming) addresses this dearth of information—and DeVos’s claim of Title IX as a witch hunt against the accused—with facts gathered from public universities, community colleges, and private institutions in a North Atlantic state, using publicly available data from Annual Security Reports and data internally reported to the state’s Commission by Title IX Coordinators. She reports: “Findings from this study show that the primary outcome of reports of gender-based violence to Title IX Coordinators *include accommodations to victims, not punishment to perpetrators*: Academic accommodations and victim referrals to services made up the majority of the on-campus response to gender-based violence” (forthcoming, 11; italics added). Who are the hunted?

June 2017: Trump on Twitter indicates he is the suspect in “the single greatest WITCH HUNT in American political history!” (Trump 2017).

Concerns for the accused figure centrally in criticisms lodged against Title IX. In a guest HuffPo column, University of Chicago Law School Professor and former dean Geoffrey R. Stone (2015) writes, “For a college or university to expel a student for sexual assault is a matter of grave consequence both for the institution and for the student. Such an expulsion will haunt the student for the rest of his days, especially in the world of the Internet. Indeed, it may well destroy his chosen career prospects.” Here, it is the accused who is “haunted” (perhaps by more witches?) and who is destroyed, but what does it mean to look across a table at a student who puts themselves through the telling because they believe you can do something; they believe you have *more* power than their political science TA who offers to help them with their essay at his house on Friday night. But what do we do knowing we *don’t* have more power? How do we mentor in a #metoo moment? What options for resistance exist?

Imagine you begin to gather data from institutions around the nation regarding their sexual relations policies between instructors and students. Imagine finding many statements with utter clarity, like Northwestern’s (2014): “When undergraduate students are involved the difference in institutional power and the inherent risk of coercion are so great that no faculty member or coaching staff member shall enter ←121 | 122→into a romantic, dating, or sexual relationship with a Northwestern undergraduate student, regardless of whether there is a supervisory or evaluative relationship between them.” A 2018 article in *Inside Higher Ed* describes the influx of such statements in the face of #MeToo. Of course, there are critics. Those who say it will be too costly to fire a professor guilty of violating a policy; those who say such policies are too difficult to enforce; those who call such policies “anti-feminist” (Flaherty 2018). We share the data with an associate dean, and she begins to draft a policy for the College of Arts and Sciences. Imagine feeling relief that a window has opened.

“It is a scary time for young men in America,” says Donald Trump, referencing sexual assault allegations against Brett Kavanaugh (Beckwith 2018). As of November 2018, Christine Blasey Ford, his accuser, has had to move four times due to death threats and harassment. She has not been able to return to her job at Palo Alto University. She must pay for security detail to protect herself and her family (Mak 2018).

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John Demos, Samuel Knight Professor of History at Yale, has studied witchcraft history for over fifty years. In an interview in *Historically Speaking*, he is asked why witch hunts happen. “At the deepest and most general level it has to do with the power of exaggerated fear,” he answers (Yerxa 2009).

Imagine a student you have mentored throughout their education comes to ask if filing a report will help, if it will protect them or help them or help other students. Imagine the familiar shake of the student’s voice, of every student’s voice, when they tell of the thing they tell about when their voices shake. Even though they want to tell about it. They want to tell us (those of us they see as their mentors, their confidants) about the time [redacted]. They want to tell someone who will care, who might “do something about it.” Though there is nothing we can do. Even as the witches we may be, our sorcery will not permeate the wall around the Title IX office.

According to Richards’ (forthcoming) study of Title IX processes and outcomes, “Few students actually used the campus administrative process, and when they did and there was a finding of responsibility, there was little guarantee that the responsible student would be removed from campus” (11). A good deal of a WPA’s work is to train teachers, to help new instructors of writing understand what is or is not their responsibility. We often tell new instructors in our program to keep numbers or campus pamphlet information on hand: the number of the Counseling Center, the Women’s Center, the LGBTQ Resource Center, Disability Services, and other campus support systems. We point them to Title IX’s website, but we privately ←122 | 123→wonder what their office is for, or if it merely acts as a courtroom outside a courtroom that protects the university. We do not know how to train new teachers to help students when students reveal harassment or assault. We do not know how to do this work ourselves in an environment that is already failing all of us.

Imagine being told not to discuss this incident with [redacted], who have many ways of knowing what happened. Imagine [redacted] [redacted] come to you, burdened, triggered, worried about the climate. Worried about whether undergraduate students are protected. Worried whether they are protected. Imagine you are failing them, too.

September/October/November/December 2018: Donald Trump calls the Mueller investigation a "witch hunt" over twenty times on Twitter.

Imagine being told that one student keeps cancelling her appointment with the Title IX office. Imagine it is not said but feels implied: She's holding up the process. Writes Leigh Gilmore (2017) in *Tainted Witness*,

> Shaming, victim blaming, discrediting, and denunciation attach to women's testimony so predictably, and are so regularly associated with it, that these negative affects function as prolepsis: they are threat that prevents women from testifying. When joined with doubt and directed at women who testify about sexual degradation, victim blaming has the epistemological status of an objective and ethical response. (7)

Imagine her words lose credibility even before they are uttered. A woman always a failed speaker, an impossible source of information about herself or others.

In *The Path of the Devil: Early Modern Witch Hunts*, Gary Jensen (2006) argues that while those targeted as witches were marginalized subjects, they were also perceived to have enough power to pose a credible threat to the social order. "Women had to be viewed as worthy of Satan's recruitment and as possessing the capacity for secret arrangements with him. *In short, they had to be viewed as capable of collective, organized, and conspiratorial arrangements*.… Convincing evidence *of collective, real* *world organization* was a necessary prerequisite for women to qualify as credible heretics” (Jensen 147).

Evidence of witches: women marching in the streets after the 2016 election; a woman who dared run for president in 2016 (lock her up!); millions of women Tweeting #metoo; record numbers of women running for office in 2018. Credible heretics.

Imagine searching for words to explain to [redacted] that Title IX’s parameters of what constitutes harassment are narrow, and that if they find no violation, it doesn’t mean a violation didn’t happen. Imagine preparing [redacted] for the institution to fail them. While you’re at it, you prepare yourself. The climate of silence and ←123 | 124→shame is a kind of contagion. So much so that when you send the student an email to check on them after what was clearly difficult conversation, you wonder if you yourself are out of line, betraying institutional or professional responsibility through a genuine expression of care, failing to keep it together yourself. If you cry to your closest friend that evening, if you express fear and sadness to your spouse about the situation, the shame sets in. You were told to talk about this to no one, that you are bound by “confidentiality” intended to “honor” the rights of the accused.

The findings are returned. *There has been no violation according to Title IX*.

Imagine that word gets out that you are working on a policy (credible heretics). Imagine grad students asking you about it, wondering when it will be voted on, who will get to vote. Can you talk about this? Imagine you are informed that many chairs are opposed. Some think it’s an overreach. Some think it doesn’t go far enough. Imagine your associate dean tells you she is hopeful. The conversation seems to happen in another dimension, one where reasonable people without emotion debate whether it is reasonable for students to be protected from sexual advances and coercion by their instructors. Witches work outside of reason. We live in all dimensions and embrace the accusation that we have responded to the situation in an affective manner. We resist the binary notion that this means we have not responded "rationally" or reasonably.

The policy passes in our College's spring faculty meeting. In one College in our university, instructors may not prey upon their students. The witches have survived. But then we are reminded, when another student contacts us, that the policy cannot be applied retroactively. Students violated before we had a policy are not covered by it.

We accept (because we acknowledge that we can often do nothing about) so many failures. There are even a few kinds of failure we celebrate as teachers of writing. But this. This failing moment seems intolerable and insurmountable. The moment is happening over and over, inside every institution one can imagine. We wonder what is possible to do besides to say *we are sorry this happened to you. This shouldn't have happened to you.* It's all we know to say. *We are sorry*.

The institution is designed to make us feel monitored, and it is precisely this monitoring that makes us forget our independence, or temporarily believe we are an arm of our institutional location and that we owe it our loyalty and compliance. What is possible to do in these circumstances?

To respond to this question, we offer a definitely-not-institutionally-approved set of guidelines for professors who find themselves in the position of advocating for ←124 | 125→and mentoring a student who has been subject to abuses of power, harassment, and/or assault by those they were meant to trust.

1. Begin by accepting each dimension of failure in which you find yourself: your department, the institution, the country, gender itself.
2. Talk as much as you want about your experience of the situation to those you need to talk to. They will tell you not to talk—to anyone ever. They cannot regulate your emotional life.

3. Resist the notion that “the academy” can “think” through this problem, can intellectualize and theorize its solutions. It cannot.
4. You are not being “not hip” or “not queer” or “not feminist” to think that instructors should not romantically and sexually pursue their students.
5. Encourage a *public* discussion of the problems associated with abuse of power in your institution. Acknowledge that these problems exist. They have been ignored and erased for far too long.
6. Refuse binary constructions of consent that do not acknowledge power dynamics.
7. Acknowledge to students who report to you that the system is likely to fail them. This does not mean they have not been violated or that their pain is not valid. It means the institution is not equipped to address problems with dimension, nuance, or power-laden complexity. It fails at this in most areas. In this area, its failure is most visibly egregious.
8. Accept that some around you will speak about you as if the situation is actually your fault and not the fault of the person who cannot fulfill their responsibility as a teacher or human being. The shame is not yours to carry.
9. Accept that you are not alone. Surround yourself (online and in person) with people and ideas that honor the complexity of this #metoo moment.
10. Accept that the findings will be returned. There will most often be *no violation according to Title IX*.

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CHAPTER NINE

The Uses of Queer Failure: Navigating the Pedagogical Mandate of Happiness

GAVIN P. JOHNSON AND RYAN SHEEHAN

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to *be a failure*? We're not asking what it means to fail or be failed or experience failure but to *embody* failure. Thinking with/about failure, especially pedagogically, is difficult because it requires abandoning progress narratives animating contemporary education logics by embracing the possibility that we can't, won't, and shouldn't succeed. We, therefore, are confronted with several cruel truths about “success” and “happiness.” Namely, these overstated goals privilege white, cis-hetero, able-bodied/minded people (usually men) from wealthier communities. With each box left unchecked, students are oriented toward narrower paths to “success” and “happiness” and wider paths to “failure.”

We place these terms in scare quotes visually questioning the efficacy of such concepts while bringing into focus the affective and ethical dimensions of “success,” “happiness,” and “failure” in pedagogical settings. By theorizing this triad of terms via queer theories, we not only ask why the path to success and happiness is designed to be inaccessible but also why that path is the only “right” way. Why should “success” or “happiness” as defined by oppressive logics be the goal instead of the thing we attempt to escape? Why do contemporary uptakes of “failure” see it merely as a detour? How can we be oriented vis-à-vis neoliberalism toward “success” and “happiness” while also accepting “failure” as a generative force?

In understanding failure as a queer force, we present the concept of the *pedagogical mandate of happiness*. With this concept, we are not rejecting the individual feeling of happiness but the systematic logic of happiness as a marker of success in pedagogical contexts. Such success, we argue, is defined through ideologies favoring normate bodies/minds by maintaining binaries crucial for cultural supremacy. Furthermore, “success” uniquely functions as both clearly defined and rather undefinable. The vagueness of success allows institutions to define and redefine it as needed to suit the needs of those in power and complicates any critical deployment of failure.

Failure has been a topic of conversation within queer scholarship for quite some time. J. Jack Halberstam (2011) offers a thesis on queer failure as an art: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2). Halberstam’s pedagogy of failure rejects the “grim scenarios of success” that mandate “trying and trying again” preferring to find different rewards and escaping “the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” (3). Halberstam’s call for low theory and *knowledge from below* signals to us to step out of line and gain different orientations to space, time, and objects. In sum, by failing we create different worlds separate from the worlds in which we weren’t meant to succeed in the first place.

Halberstam’s writings on failure, ironically, have found great success, and queer failure has joined other in vogue discussions of failure across the disciplines. However, of the literature currently in circulation, we find two issues with the deployment of Halberstam’s queer failure: first, an uncritical valorization of Halberstam’s theorization that lacks attention to its ethically fraught material dimensions; and second, a deployment of queer failure as a “detour on the road to success” that supports a pedagogical mandate of happiness. In this chapter, we propose a (re)orientation of queer failure that acknowledges the pedagogical mandate of happiness. We contend the pedagogical mandate of happiness, which produces success as always already positive and desirable, renders Halberstam’s theory and its uptake dangerously focused on individual rather than collective change. In what follows, we expand Halberstam’s queer failure and use Sara Ahmed’s writings to theorize the pedagogical mandate of happiness. We then turn to two individual stories where queer failure manifests in pedagogy and demonstrate the complexity of failure at an individual and collective level. We conclude by suggesting a turn away from the pedagogical mandate of happiness while also offering the concept of *navigation,* the process of balancing individual desires with collective expectations. We believe such a reorientation pushes us to acknowledge the present material configurations of the pedagogical mandate of happiness while also suggesting other directions in our lives and our scholarship.

←128 | 129→

QUEER FAILURES: HALBERSTAM’S FOLLIES

Wait: what exactly do we mean by queer and, furthermore, “queer failure?”

For us, queer is a way of orienting and being oriented; and/or a radical deconstruction of normative politics of sexuality, gender, race, disability, and class. Generally, queer perspectives reject heteronormative and homonormative logics of liberation, instead blurring the lines between binaries like “man” and “woman,” “straight” and “gay,” “success” and “failure.” We, in this essay, most often use it as a verb (“to queer”) or an adjective (“a queer essay”). “To queer” is to query “common sense,” subjecting something to queer thinking; affixing queer as an adjective involves identifying the queer potentialities percolating to the surface of even the most normative concepts or objects.

How did we get here? We follow José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) argument that queer is utopian—always on the horizon, but the potentiality of which emerges out of interaction with everyday objects and cultural artifacts. We understand that Muñoz’s articulation of queer runs the risk of privileging aesthetics and futurity in queer politics, eliding present concerns and the materiality of bodies (Chávez 2013). Here we find inspiration in Ahmed’s observation that queering engenders proximities, a moving together towards that slippery future in the here and now. As Ahmed (2006) writes:

> Queer objects support proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet.* A queer object hence makes contact possible. Or, to be more precise, a queer object would have a surface that supports such contact. The contact is bodily, and it unsettles that line that divides spaces as worlds, thereby creating other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen. (169)

As Ahmed continues, queer proximities produce new pathways which deviate from maintained roads of the well-trodden norm. In turning away from what is expected we are rendered disoriented, yet queer possibilities intimately manifest as a result: “Queer engenders a moment of contact; how we come into contact with other bodies to support the action of following paths that have not been cleared” (170).

So what makes “failure” queer? Halberstam argues that success represents a linear pathway or teleology. The teleology looks something like this:

> Grow up → Get married → Buy a house →
>
> Have kids → Work Hard → Work Harder → Die.

In contrast, “failure” is queer and “queer” is failure. Queer folks succeed at failure because they are always resisting one or all of these instructions. And here we ←129 | 130→need to be *very* clear: In our reading, queer failure for Halberstam is not just a detour en route to success or a simple questioning of success. Queer failure often violently wrenches in opposite directions. Queer failure does not serve institutions; it does not serve normative thinking; it defies mastery; it is often painful. Despite the pain, Halberstam insists queer failure represents a generative politics beyond despair and disappointment that “provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (3).

Herein lies the problem with Halberstam’s queer failure: for all the theory’s promise, it lacks an affectively nuanced understanding of ethics and subjectivity. Halberstam’s oeuvre remains committed to a masochistic politics of feminism and queer ontology. These masochistic politics are most clear in Halberstam’s (2011) valorization of female self-harm, which is referred to through the double entendre of “cutting” (135; cf. Ruti 2017, 189). We are not saying this sort of logic should not be engaged; but these observations, free of any ethics other than “fail, fail, fail again and love the pain,” render Halberstam’s queer failure an individual *imperative* rather than a residual effect of material relations (Ruti 2017, 192). Unlike other queer scholars who have examined the political potentiality of negative affect, Mari Ruti notes, “Halberstam elevates abjection into a politico-ethical *goal*, suggesting that any feminist, any woman, who aspires to autonomy instead is not a ‘real’ feminist but merely a puppet of the hegemonic system that produces dreams of inaccessible sovereignty” (192).

Failure, for Halberstam, feels bad. It should feel bad, and feeling bad produces new politics. And if you succeed, it feels good, but you’re also a sucker. It would seem through Halberstam that nearly *everyone* should fail, up to and including those engaging in self-harm. To this, as pedagogues, we ask: If we demand students fail and feel bad while doing it, what damage are we fostering in our classrooms? Does every student have the potential to fail without destroying not only institutions but themselves?

A PEDAGOGICAL MANDATE OF HAPPINESS

Let's try a new direction for queer failure that doesn't necessarily play nice with normative pedagogy but lets us acknowledge its affective and subjective complexity. To this end, pedagogy, traditionally defined, produces the pedagogical mandate of happiness. This pedagogical mandate of happiness makes queer failure always already a bad feeling. Someone has to *be a failure* for someone else to *be a success*; and if success always produces happiness, then failure demands one not be happy.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed (2010) tracks the manifold iterations of happiness through Western thought. Ahmed reveals some of the ways happiness is conflated with success, an acquisition of "the good life," through the fear that ←130 | 131→happiness is in crisis because it is attainable by the "wrong" types of people (13). Thus, "the demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them" (7). Happiness, Ahmed argues, offers a suspended promise—you are promised the good and happy life, but you must get there yourself. Thus, happiness is less something found but followed through the cultivation towards objects that are tasteful, setting an example for others to pursue. Happiness is rendered a cultural imperative rather than something that *happens* to someone.

Yet, as Ahmed elucidates, happiness historically understood is exceptionally contingent, which renders happiness not only possible (albeit circumstantial) but also rhetorical in her work: happiness happens. It just shouldn't *have* to happen all the time. We might claim the residual effects of this happiness imperative produces Lauren Berlant's (2011) provocative notion of *cruel optimism*, wherein the object of your desire for "the good life” becomes your own undoing; or, happiness is a promise of success that can still feel terrible. The pedagogical mandate of happiness manifests much the same way as the broad promise of happiness: in the current neoliberal moment, all pedagogical outcomes are measured vis-à-vis good feelings and success. To succeed at learning is to feel good regardless of the outcome prescribed before you. And if you feel miserable while trying to learn without a positive outcome, then the learning was not meant for you.

This inattention to the complexities of happiness renders Halberstam’s queer failure unethical. Without understanding that a mandate of happiness operates on a logic of self-evident feelings, (queer) failure becomes recognized as only a negative affective orientation. In reveling in these bad feelings, Halberstam also misses that deviation from success is not always an option for some bodies. As Ahmed qualifies time and again, deviation from the path might be desired but difficult: “Deviation is hard. Deviation is made hard.” It is thus why privilege is the ultimate “energy saving device; less effort is required to pass through when a world has been assembled around you” (Ahmed 2018).

It is for these reasons that critiquing the pedagogical mandate of happiness seems more ethical than merely reveling in the power of failure. To do so uncritically reproduces the notion that failure and success are affectively recognizable pathways available to all. But orienting queer failure away from the pedagogical mandate of happiness means embracing the affective messiness of failure in pedagogical settings.

Demonstrating the necessity of recognizing the pedagogical mandate of happiness, we offer several examples of failure and queer failure in our home field of rhetoric and composition. These are not representative of the growing literature on failure; however, we think these examples illustrate just how slippery a term failure is and how easy it is to embrace a mandate of happiness.

←131 | 132→

Choosing Failure

In *Bad Ideas About Writing*, Allison Carr (2017) pushes against the American educational conscience's categorization of failure as a weakness, dullness, and laziness while simultaneously questioning the parallel "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" narrative of acceptable failure. Carr points out, "Failure represents a certain against-the-grain jettisoning of established ideas about what counts as good writing in favor of rogue, original, attention-capturing, and intentional art" (76). She concludes, "Failure—and a willingness to fail often in large, obvious ways—should always be an option" (80). In *Naming What We Know*, Collin Brooke and Carr (2015) argue for "*pedagogies of failure*, or ways of teaching that seek to illuminate the myriad of ways writing gets done by examining all the ways it doesn't. Embracing failure in the writing classroom in these ways makes failure speakable and doable" (63). Measuring with the framework of queer failure, we appreciate how Carr supports the recognition of disrupting or jettisoning from normative ideas to offer different possibilities and the need to illuminate failure as a human practice; however, Carr's presentation of failure is buttressed by the pedagogical mandate of happiness and rhetoric of choice. Writers, she argues, should have the option to fail in educational settings in order to learn, and, furthermore, we should rejoice in such failure because it demonstrates a capacity for change.

Mastering Failure

Jacqueline Rhodes (2015) stoically asks, "Can such a thing as queer pedagogy even exist?" (n.p.). Recalling previous publications on the critical use of queer theory in writing classrooms, Rhodes admits being perplexed by the juxtaposition of "queer" "pedagogy." She notes, "There can be and are queer teachers. There can be and is queer teaching. But queer teachers teaching queerly still struggle against capital "P" pedagogy which is informed by a logic of mastery, of individual attainment, and of institutional assessment of that attainment" (n.p.). In declaring the failure of queer pedagogy, Rhodes leaves open the possibility (and imperative?) to *queer* pedagogy. Shifting to an example, Rhodes narrates her refusal and inability to offer students “mastery over such a topic” and even refusing to “offer [herself] as a master of the subject.” In rejecting mastery, Rhodes and the students master queer failure. Through the pedagogical performance of failure, which involves both Rhodes and the students leaving the classroom puzzled, confused, angry, the (paradoxical) success of this queer pedagogy is measured against the same pedagogical mandate of happiness. After all, were the students and Rhodes happy with this performance of failure?

←132 | 133→

Courting Failure

In *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing*, Stacey Waite (2017) investigates queer failure. Waite acknowledges that composition and writing studies is more than familiar with the notion of failure, and, like Rhodes and Carr, she points to education’s obsession with grades and programmatic assessment as institutionalized notions of failure. With pedagogy and failure as happy bedfellows, Waite proposes students “begin with failure, focusing on the already failing extent of our various knowledges” (68). In courting failure, Waite’s goal is to pull back the curtain and expose the institutional functions of power and call into question practices that are embedded in education and symbolize success. Waite’s sense of queer pedagogy asks students to identify the limits of their knowledge, acknowledge the failure of institutionalized learning to expand certain knowledges, and use inventive composing styles to fail the institution while gaining different knowledges. Waite’s model, we admit, is enticing and worthwhile. However, it also demonstrates the paradox of queer failure as a pedagogical imperative. We are only able to understand failure through the lens of normative success; or, put more specifically, we can only define failure by subscribing to a model of success and then critiquing the ways the institution has failed us and limited our knowledges.

The through line between Carr, Rhodes, and Waite’s arguments is the desiring of failure. Failure in the classroom is celebrated because it is divergent. But in desiring failure, we begin to understand the failure of queer failure. Failure does indeed open up new possibilities and ways of thinking; however, failure also has material realities that must be acknowledged and dealt with ethically. Of (queer) failure we must ask: Who has the privilege to fail?

Therefore, taming failure—framing it one way or the other—is uninteresting. What, instead, is an ethical application for queer failure within and without pedagogical spaces? We are not here to proclaim a kind of failure that is joyful, or a sort of success that is miserable, or vice versa. Nor are we arguing that failure is inherently "queer," or that queer failure is inherently political. We are instead interested in how the expectation of success as a measure of happiness, as a way of "going with the flow" (Ahmed 2012), entails a negotiation of one's desires. We take our own desires as a starting point.

If we think of queer failure as a deliberate action against normative logics destined to fail but undertaken regardless, we can find instructive examples in current campus activism and in the messiness of teaching. In the following sections, we each provide an example of queer failure within pedagogical spaces. Recognizing that queer often emerges *in situ* (Bessette 2016), we expect that some readers may not share our interpretations of these events as queer. Nevertheless, we maintain, ←133 | 134→failure is not always queer; however, often, within dominant cultural logics, queer is always a kind of failure.

GAVIN TALKS GRADES

When thinking pedagogically about failure, I immediately see flashes of red ink. Failure's dominant technology in educational spaces are grades, and grades discursively and materially construct students, teachers, and others entangled in pedagogical webs. Elsewhere, I argue that grades are a technology of surveillance that communicate neoliberal values and construct students not only for audiences of the university but also for the students themselves:

> The *process* follows: grades label students ("this is an A student, that student is at risk of failing"), students perform identities based on those labels ("I'm smart" or "I'm dumb"), and students operate within material and cultural structures of power as determined by their identities (business executives, middle-class workers, and lower-class laborers). (Johnson 2020)

Without being hyperbolic, this process is one of categorization, discipline, and control. By marking students as above average, average, below average, we practice neo-colonial hierarchies that are central to the cultural circulation of bodies, objects, and status. Our attempts to categorize students congeal through iterative practices of discipline that eventually lead to "success" (awards and diploma endorsements, scholarships, internships, job offers) or "failure" (loss of scholarships, dismissal from school, rejected job applications). A recent shift in educational theory and learning assessment questions the ethics of evaluation. Authors Asao Inoue and Mya Poe (2012) argue that many of the criteria we force upon students are informed by a white *habitus* that supports racist and otherwise bigoted agendas. The example of queer failure I offer is a disruption of the racism perpetuated by grades through anti-racist activism.

In December 2018 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), a group of approximately 80 instructors of record—including professors, instructors, graduate teaching assistants, and staff—released an open letter to parents and guardians of UNC students concerning the semester-long controversy centering the 105-year-old Confederate soldier statue named "Silent Sam" (Open Letter 2018). The statue, like many other post-Civil War monuments to the Confederacy, is a symbol of historic and systematic racism, and, on the eve of the first day of classes, students toppled Silent Sam in protest. Following this act of protest, faculty and student groups advocated for the removal of the statue; however, such an act is impossible due to North Carolina law. Instead, the Board of Trustees and UNC Chancellor Carol Folt proposed a $5.3 million "history center" where the ←134 | 135→statue could reside (Dirty 2018). This proposal was met with additional protest, and, in response, at least 80 instructors of record threatened to withhold an estimated 2,300 final grades if the proposal was approved. After 13 days, grades were released following the UNC System Board of Governors vote against the proposal (Stancill 2018). UNC officials were tasked with developing an alternative proposal by March 2019, and Chancellor Folt announced her resignation from UNC in January 2019 (Seltzer 2019).

While the action taken by the "StrikeDownSam Anti-Racist Coalition" lasted just under two weeks, the activism forced administrative bodies to reconsider their actions. While this victory-of-sorts demonstrates the power of collective action when advocating for anti-racist objectives, queer failure is present in at least two important and interdependent ways. First, the leverage of withholding grades was always going to fail, and when the action was planned that failure was key to forcing change. The instructors used grades, with their extensive material and cultural capital, to disrupt business-as-usual but knew they would eventually surrender grades and, at best, minimum change would come to the UNC campus. The queer failure of this act is not *failing* to post grades or *failing* to overhaul an entire racist system but rather pushing the institution "offline," navigating away from discourses of institutional happiness, and (re)orienting conversations toward action.

Second, and perhaps more instructive, this action demonstrates how an idea like queer failure navigates us away from the normative logic of grades, which often act as a metonym for success. In failing spectacularly in their bureaucratic duties, teacher-activists not only called attention to the administration's compliance with white supremacy but also called attention to the failure of grades. Indeed, the withholding of grades did not strip students of their learned knowledge or turn back the clock on the semester. Truly the only damage withholding grades causes is the slowing of the bureaucratic mechanisms of neoliberal education. The action, then, opens the possibility for us to think beyond grades as central to the learning process.

RYAN TALKS VIDEO GAMES

I teach rhetoric and writing classes about video games. For some, that already makes me a failure. Look at me, teaching about silly things like video games when I *could* be teaching about the “real world.” I could point the critics to the myriad scholarship espousing the pedagogical potential of video games. But let’s go another way.

One of my favorite games to teach is *Gone Home* (2013), a first-person adventure-puzzle game set in 1990s Portland, Oregon. Players take on the role of Katie Greenbriar, a young woman returning to the United States after a trip abroad. ←135 | 136→During Katie’s trip, her family inherits and subsequently moves into a new home. Upon arrival, Katie finds a note tacked to the door from her younger sister Sam urging her not to investigate her whereabouts. But the player explores, turning over evidence to eventually learn Sam ran away with her new girlfriend, Lonnie, after a year of reckoning with her sexual identity and attempting to come out to her unsupportive parents.

While the ending of *Gone Home* is optimistic, the overall experience is harrowing. The Greenbriar residence is creepy, implied to be haunted. The dire elements of Sam’s narrative suggest the player will find her hurt or worse. Zachary Harvat (2018) suggests the narrative of *Gone Home* emerges through sleuthing an archive of junk. Whereas other sleuthing games work towards unraveling tragedy, *Gone Home* balances a traumatic site with a hopeful conclusion. Harvat (2018) writes, “*Gone Home* presents a lesbian adolescence and the kinds of fantasies that characterize the imaginations of queer kids only just beginning to understand the possibilities of their identities and the limitations imposed on them by institutions of heteronormativity” (12).

Nevertheless, many (presumably) straight students in my class question *Gone Home*’s hopeful ending. Why is the Greenbriar home so hostile when it is ultimately a collection of mundane stuff? I explain how lesbian characters have historically been marked for death, conversion, or villainy. I say their disappointment likely came from the anticipation of finding dead lesbians, and then not finding any. I add that for many queer folks who come out, the process defamiliarizes one’s surroundings as much as it provides for possibility. *Gone Home* thus models the exploration of identity and the affective complexity of coming out.

Usually by the end of my lecture, wary students are convinced: the game was worth their time, even if it wasn’t “fun.” Did I succeed in teaching the game? Is this a queer failure of my pedagogy? “Fun,” after all, is not a politically neutral model for game design. Indeed, *Gone Home* was a central game in the cultural moment known as #GamerGate, a reactionary movement of gamers who believed feminist and diversity-based issues skew game design and journalism. *Gone Home*, the #GamerGate argument goes, received critical attention and praise due to its inclusion of LGBTQ themes, but its emphasis on exploration and lack of combat makes it fail as a “game” (Van DerWerff 2014). Bonnie Ruberg (2015) elucidates that the question of “fun” is central to #GamerGate’s critiques. Games, Ruberg argues, receive merit for their ability to be fun, but fun is not a politically neutral or universal term; “fun” is often rhetorically deployed to maintain exclusionary boundaries in gaming communities. Through a close reading of Halberstam’s queer failure, Ruberg argues no-fun can engender a masochistic politics of play, wherein “implicitly heteronormative paradigms of failure and success are destabilized by the willing, playful embrace of pain and ‘game over’ ” (115). The resulting transgression is potentially queer; for Ruberg, these no-fun feelings are felt on their ←136 | 137→own terms, not as a detour from productive success or for the purpose of instilling empathy.

I don’t take Ruberg to mean we must revel in bad feelings in order for things to be “queer.” But her argument does make me wonder: What does it mean that I can *successfully* teach *Gone Home*? Success here is measured by my ability to make *Gone Home* palatable to (presumably straight and cisgender) students. Does my ability to render their play worthwhile—to make the bad feelings this game evokes serve the ends of empathy—unqueer the game? To some degree we could blame *Gone Home* itself. As merit kopas (2017) and Harvat (2018) note, while the game’s inclusion of

LGBTQ themes is extraordinary, it ultimately centers the (supposedly straight) Katie absent of Sam. Yet I think of a female student who stopped me in the hallway after discussing *Gone Home*. “I loved the game,” she said. “Finally, something where I didn’t find myself dead.”

Perhaps success can be queer after all.

COME … NAVIGATE AWAY

Halberstamian queer failure seemingly demands we embrace the dangerous, the painful, and the destructive. Such a move strips away the labor on behalf of students and pedagogues as they reckon with complexity. Sometimes we see the path before us and understand we want to go differently. Other times that’s not viable. We must value that decision-making while remaining oriented towards justice. In order for queer failure to be generative, it must navigate away from the pedagogical mandate of happiness. We must acknowledge the affective ambivalence of success and failure, and that such terms are determined and maintained through their demand in pedagogical settings. We must take care to acknowledge the labor of balancing one’s desires with expectations, of the laborious process of strategizing given the pathways laid out for one to follow. We refer to this as navigation.

Navigation, we contend, is a material-discursive practice that acknowledges the labor of strategizing, weighing expectation against personal desire. In deploying navigation, one might think we are drawing upon a new spatial metaphor. However, we note Nedra Reynolds’ (2004) claim that geographical metaphors are limited as they detach us from the material realities of moving through literal boundaries. This is why we conceive of “navigation” as a material-discursive practice: Getting up out of bed in the morning is as much navigation as attempting to figure out the terrain of a discourse community. Obviously, navigation comes with political weight—for some it seems straightforward, while for others the decision can literally mean life and death. Failure is thus not always desirable, even if one desires it, due to the politics of navigation. To this end, we argue queer failure can influence pedagogical praxis through an ethical enactment of various orientations ←137 | 138→towards and away from success and happiness (often to the detriment of the university, but sometimes operating within its constraints), and acknowledging that strategizing is not only laborious but affectively messy.

Navigation also crucially renders queer failure an undetermined result, rather than a predetermined destination, of one's journey. In our examples, we demonstrate the ambivalent affective dimensions of success and failure. What is most interesting to us is that each narrative contains a radical moment of uncertainty, where success and failure become unclear and actions cannot be effectively qualified until after the fact. It's important that UNC faculty and staff knew grades must eventually be released while not knowing if Silent Sam would be removed. Likewise, making a game about queer youth palatable to cis-hetero students invokes ethical questions about pedagogical audience. We note conscious desires here to enact particular kinds of change—but what form that change took wasn't clear until the resolution, and thus both were loaded with risk. Emphasizing navigation, therefore, demands we never pre-emptively call potentially painful detours queer failures, but instead recognize the risk and complexity of making those choices in the first place.

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←138 | 139→

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← 139 | 140 →

CHAPTER TEN

Committing to Failure: Critical Pedagogy and Failure in Classroom Teaching

JEANETTE LEHN

Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014) define a “critical multicultural pedagogy” as proceeding “with both a recognition of our common humanity and a strong critical sense of our radical alterity, of the critical differences that exist among different people’s and different groups’ experiences of the world” (431). Via Henry Giroux, Alexander and Rhodes (2014) also point to an imperative to assist students in harnessing their own agency for a more just world. Giroux states that we should offer “students a language that allows them to reconstruct their moral and political energies in the service of creating a more just and equitable social order, one that undermines relations of hierarchy and domination" (qtd. in Alexander and Rhodes 2014, 431). Lynn Worsham (1998) argues that any commitment to social change must respond to decolonization of the body and the emotional self, and Linda Adler-Kassner (2008) points to the collective construction of knowledge as activist work, which I see echoing Paulo Freire's conception of critical pedagogy in which dialogue and shared knowledge-making embody the "practice of freedom" (Freire 1993). The goals of critical pedagogy that are implied by the scholarship above include encouraging students to recognize shared humanity, to develop awareness of essentializing differences, to imagine a more just future, to decolonize cultural values, and to encourage student participation in shared knowledge-making activities. These are all noble and vital goals, though they can seem to exist as ideals rather than daily attainables. Pursuing these ideals in practice is intrinsically challenging. As Amanda Beach, Richard Thein and Daryl Parks (2007) state, social justice teaching "can leave teachers with questions ←141 | 142→about what kind of changes are desirable and what kind of changes are possible" (54). If what a successful critical pedagogy means is so hard to define, how then would failure to achieve a critical pedagogy be defined? If it's so hard to know what success is, how are teachers committed to social justice supposed to recognize failure when it happens?

In this discussion, I am defining failure as moments when some sort of harm may have occurred or was mismanaged in a classroom or teaching setting. The two types of harm I point to are the failure to prevent students from being harmed, and the failure to manage harm caused either by our students or by ourselves as teachers. The pursuit of social justice involves risk and potential failures, and harm may follow from those failures. Teachers, therefore, must decide how deeply to invest and what potential risks or harms are tenable. As teachers, when we commit ourselves to the pursuit of social justice in our pedagogy, we must also accept that frequent failure will automatically be part of the work. Alongside that acceptance are questions of who pays for failures, at what price, and, if any insight is gained, who is set up to gain from that transaction.

In the course of my efforts to stay committed to social justice, I produce numerous failures: I misspeak, run out of time, and stumble over words; my students resist my efforts, ignore the structure of prompts, and turn in stock responses. Classroom pedagogy offers the chance to engage students in cultural critique, but as soon as models of critical discourse have been modeled with one group of students, the labor of setting up challenging questions to a new group of students renews—the slate wiped clean, the hard work begins again. In this chapter, I offer two stories that document my failed efforts to enact critical pedagogy and then reflect on their potential meaning. My stories emerge from a class I taught and a one-on-one conference with a student in response to a piece of writing. These uncomfortable moments reveal the difficulty and value of discussing failures that happen in a highly stratified culture like academia. While they stand out as moments when I questioned my career, these experiences offer insight about pushing past disappointments to understand why and how we remain committed to pursuing social justice through classroom practice.

FAILING TO PREVENT STUDENTS FROM BEING HARMED

The class is an upper level composition course themed around digital technology, and I have organized my section around James Porter's (2009) conception of *techné*, which he defines as comprising of "productive how-to knowledge" and "practical judgment, ethical phronesis—i.e., the ability to ask and answer critical questions about one's choices" (23). What Porter stresses is that skill in a digital context is not only technical skill but also critical awareness about the repercussions of one's ←142 | 143→composing choices. My goal for this day's class activity is to stress the ethical implications of recycling cultural material; specifically, when an image or text is remixed, the cultural associations paired with that text are remixed along with it, potentially perpetuating dangerous stereotypes or ideologies.

I show the students two video remixes, “Star Wars Kid” (Love 2006) and “Bedroom Intruder” (Schmoyoho 2010). “Star Wars Kid” is a viral video made in 2002 wherein footage of a high schooler pretending to be a Jedi was leaked online. The protagonist of the clip is unlike that of a typical superhero in appearance. I ask the students, “Why are we laughing?” with the implication being that this is “funny” because the protagonist’s body image does not match cultural ideals. I explain the notion of “benign violation,” (McGraw and Warren 2010) which suggests that what a social group finds “funny” is content that appears outside of social norms, and I invite the class to debate whether this clip is “benign” and truly humorous, or if the clip is harmful and operates from negative stereotypes.

The next remix I show is “Bedroom Intruder,” a popular viral video from 2010 (Schmoyoho 2010). The video features a news clip of a young African American man named Antoine Dodson giving commentary to a news reporter about a string of sexual assaults that have occurred in a housing project, the most notable quote being “hide your kids, hide your wife.” The makers of the video, Schmohoyo (2019), sampled Dodson and used auto-tune technology to create a catchy song, and they remixed portions of the news clip to create an accompanying YouTube video. The video was hugely popular—college marching bands played the tune at football games the year it was released (Jones, Jr. 2010). It is also of note that Schmohoyo (2019) are white. Similar to the first video, I ask my students, “Why are we laughing at this video? Is this benevolent or is this harmful?” A few students respond, pointing out that the video has a silly tone. The students resist the implication that the video is racist, and I dialogue with the students, presenting the notion that this dangerous recycling of African American stereotypes casts them as Others in pernicious ways with a white rhetor in the position of power.

A female student tries to join the conversation by pointing out another critique of the video—it makes extreme lightness of rape and sexual assault. Her comment does not gain traction with the other students, and I see that this student is crying. She mutters under her breath, “They just don’t care.” I instantly feel a wave of failure. I have failed at keeping her safe, she is re-traumatized, and I don’t know what to do next. My mind runs through a range of options. Do I ask her if she is okay after class? Do I let her come to me? Do I email her after class? I don’t want to draw attention to her tears and exacerbate the current situation. I quickly wrap up our discussion. I decide not to ask her to discuss what happened, maybe out of respect for her, but also out of fear and my own ignorance about how to manage what just happened in my classroom. I question whether or not I should even try to bring this kind of material into class. Maybe I’m not equipped or skilled ←143 | 144→enough. I leave class that day feeling I failed on many levels—personally, professionally, civically.

I think about Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991) notion of the “contact zone”—the idea that the classroom is a space for linguistic and cultural encounters, wherein power is negotiated, wherein struggle occurs, but where conclusions are not necessarily arrived at—one that brings risks along with rewards. Pratt writes, “Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone” (39). Do I lack the fortitude to make Pratt’s contact zone a reality? Or maybe I’m just not qualified to have conversations about difficult social issues with students? In 1992, Maxine Hairston argued against the rise of cultural studies in first-year writing courses, stating, “When classes focus on complex issues such as racial discrimination, economic injustices, and inequities of class and gender, they should be taught by qualified faculty who have the depth of information and historical competence that such critical social issues warrant” (186). Am I the unqualified faculty implied in her critique?

Scholars of composition have debated what degree of conflict is acceptable in a classroom, a debate that appears outside of academia as well, evidenced by media reports on trigger warnings (Brown 2016), academic freedom, and free speech on campus (Shear 2019). John Trimbur (1989) argues for the pedagogical value of conflict, stating that “ ‘struggle’ is not a matter of interrupting the conversation to replace consensual validation with force. It refers rather to the relations between the two terms—intellectual negotiation and power—in what we think of as rational argument and public discourse" (608). bell hooks (2014) states that "bourgeois values in the classroom create a barrier, blocking the possibility of confrontation and conflict" (178), values that we may have to resist if we want to adopt a model of teaching based on critical pedagogy. A. Suresh Canagarajah (1997) advocates for the importance of safe houses, especially for minority and marginalized students, and for allowing students the ability to retreat from conflict, especially if the academy poses itself as a place where students may risk a loss of identities. Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy (1996) propose that instructors who find confrontational pedagogy too difficult to adopt could focus instead on "setting conditions for student perplexity and ownership" (349) in line with a Deweyan or collaborative approach to pedagogy.

These various positions point to how instructors can approach not just conflict, but also risk in a classroom. How should a teacher negotiate competing views? To put more on the line might lead to greater levels of insight, the "joys of the contact zone," but might also introduce greater potential for failure and the harm that can follow from failure. Leveraging risk for greater insight becomes tenuous if we consider that failure may have effects that manifest unevenly based on individual subjectivities of students (and instructors) in terms of power, status, and/or social ←144 | 145→standing. Returning to my classroom story: One student bore a greater emotional burden than others in the room. I invited the class into the contact zone, and the effects of that negotiation were not value free—I could have stopped with the first video, but I wanted to make the point that the stakes were higher, that the problem of mishandling cultural stereotypes was bigger and more widespread. An instructor may feel the urge to push too strongly for consensus or to state the "right" moral judgment in response to an issue, in order to achieve a feeling of having "finished" addressing a social issue. But for whose benefit, that of the teacher or the students? Being able to resist the urge to push too strongly for insight could be mitigated by acquiring a sense of the discourse boundaries within a classroom, but knowledge of those boundaries requires a teacher to build trust with students, and those relationships take time and effort.

The speed of social change and the work of social justice is slow, recursive, and often invisible, which adds to the challenge of critical teaching. Beach, Thein and Parks (2007) state that “significant changes in beliefs and attitudes happen slowly over the course of many years,” and “through experiencing [recognition of the difference between the beliefs and perspectives they bring with them and the beliefs and perspectives of others], students can become more aware of their critical beliefs and perspectives and may then become more willing to temporarily try on alternative perspectives” (55). Thus, part of adapting a model of teaching based on tenets of critical pedagogy is having faith that the work will be meaningful. A liminality appears between patience and action. To be hasty may be putting too much on the line in terms of risk—risk that doesn’t belong to us, that belongs to our students—but to hesitate may mean allowing injustice or a lack of awareness of injustice to flourish.

FAILING TO MANAGE HARM CAUSED BY A STUDENT

A white male student has turned in an assignment that contains frequent use of the “n-word.” This is a “remix” assignment for which he has taken the comedy routine of an African American comedian and created a comic strip in Microsoft Word, making the word splay across the pages in big lettering. I email him and tell him we must discuss this project in my office. I am a white, cis-gendered female teaching assistant, and I am very nervous to have this discussion. In the conference, I ask him about his process, and I explain to him that what one can say is dependent on subjectivity and audience in an effort to explain the distinction between what this comedian is doing and what he has done for this assignment. I ask him, “If I was an African American teacher, would you have turned this in?” He says, “No, I thought it was just to you.” I am floored by the implication that he deemed the essay acceptable to turn in because I am a white teacher (showing that I failed ←145 | 146→ to consider how the pact of whiteness tacitly operates). He seems to understand that the paper is a problem, but I am not sure to what extent. I am not sure that I have the spiritual energy to greet this paper again, and I don't make him rewrite the assignment. I am hoping that the awkwardness of our meeting may be enough to provoke critical reflection on his behalf. I am at a loss as to how to grade the assignment and afraid to grade harshly for fear of retaliation in my evaluations (and possibly even physical retaliation—his sarcasm and detached disposition in class set off an internalized wariness in me about upsetting young men in educational settings). I give the student a B-. I feel failure in the sense that I am unsure of how to uphold standards in this situation. What is the standard protocol? Should I have more sternly rebuked him? Should I have shared this paper with my supervisors? Should I have had conversations in class about racist language? We have had peer review sessions, but this student has been absent frequently. I am not sure about what he has shared with other students, and I am concerned this text may have harmed other students in the classroom. I leave my office that day feeling I have not done enough, upset by the shortcomings of my stamina, and by my complicity in the institutional and cultural structures that reward white mediocrity, both my student's and my own.

In "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know Your Place Aggression," Koritha Mitchell (2018) states, "The culture is constructed to ensure that white people can be mediocre (or worse) and still benefit" (256). Mitchell (2018) continues, "This is more of a social problem than a personal one; about American society's low expectations and how those low expectations shape behavior" (256). My low expectations of this student to be accountable for his writing and my passive management of this conflict are two examples of white mediocrity. My student's belief that using such language in a paper would be acceptable, and his expectation that I would not object to it because I'm white, exemplify complicity in white mediocrity. What's more: This mediocrity is integral in the structures that allow for white supremacy in our institutional culture.

In *Responsibility for Justice*, political philosopher Iris Young (2010) distinguishes between guilt and responsibility via a discussion of Hannah Arendt: “Guilt should be attributed to persons who commit crimes or wrongs, or directly contribute to the crimes or wrongs. Being responsible, but not guilty, is a designation that belongs to persons whose active or passive support for governments, institutions, and practices enables culprits to commit crimes and wrongs” (91–92). Young (2010) adds that guilt comes in degrees, and she defines responsibility as a collective and shared endeavor between members of a group, which includes “responsibility for what has been done in your name” (85). The conversation I had with my student made me acutely aware of my responsibility to address racism within his paper, but I had difficulty determining the degree of guilt I bore in allowing this text to be produced. I felt a sense of failure in determining both how to remedy the system ←146 | 147→that produced such a text and how to process my own failure to acknowledge my white fragility—that is, my fear and uncertainty about how to break the implicit pact of whiteness and counter racist speech. Who would pay for my inability to prevent this? Potentially, not just me or my students, but an unknown number of individuals outside my classroom, many of whom would likely be vulnerable.

What transpired in the meeting with my student reveals structural racism, and I (still) struggle to draw the line between myself and that system. Speaking to Bonni Stachiowiak for the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, Asao Inoue comments on teachers’ entanglements in racist structures:

> We all come from and work in hegemonic systems—systems that are established and have particular biases or determined effects. So that means that if you got to where you are as a teacher today you came out of white supremacist systems. You have those biases, even if your politics and your desires and your impulses are to not be that. And that I think—and I don’t think that anyone is a bad person. I’m saying that what we have are bad systems. (qtd. in Stachiowiak 2018)

Being part of a bad system doesn’t let me off the hook for failing. I still failed. Factors like my precarious position as a graduate student, my gender-conforming presentation, my culturally appropriate feminized desire to be “good” or “likeable,” and my self-esteem issues related to personal traumas that make expressing authority difficult—these factors disempower me. Simultaneously, my position within the institution and my whiteness protect me from feeling the harsh effects of my failure, but those same things, my institutional position and my white privilege, also enable me to have a platform, from which I can engage in critical discourses and wherein people will listen should I choose to speak. My silence could also be seen as wasting an opportunity to enact social justice principles.

The one-on-one meeting with my student left me emotionally drained and confused. And the emotional labor required to navigate such encounters is additionally taxed if we are teaching in sub-optimal situations. Laura Micciche (2007) characterizes the “culture of disappointment” that can accompany teaching in the humanities as a result of decreased support for the humanities in many institutions, declining job markets, the abuse of adjuncts in many institutions, or (in my case) low graduate student stipends and mounting student loan debt, burdens that bear on more than one’s personal finances. Such work contexts, combined with emotionally draining labor, create the conditions for burnout, a condition described by journalist Anne Helen Peterson (2019) as acknowledging “the multiplicity of our lived reality … while recognizing our status quo.… [A];ll while being told that if we just work harder, meritocracy will prevail and we’ll begin thriving.”

Living up to moral standards associated with social justice can exacerbate burnout, partly because of what Kathleen Rodgers (2010) calls the “discourse of selflessness,” a term from research on activist communities, wherein it’s unacceptable ←147 | 148→to claim personal strain as a reason for the inability to fully commit to the pursuit of justice. Rodgers (2010) states, “The ubiquitous discourse of selflessness pervades the internal dynamics of the organization, and in terms of the emotional culture of the organization, it means that displays of personal strain, sadness, or depression, while perhaps understandable, are viewed by a considerable amount of the staff as unnecessary and self-indulgent" (279). Rodgers' discussion of the "discourse of selflessness" is a key concept for Paul Gorski and Cher Chen (2015) who researched activist burnout and identified three categories of symptoms among social justice activists: "deterioration of emotional and psychological health, deterioration of physical health, and disillusionment and hopelessness" (402). This research suggests that some instructors may avoid conflict to minimize burnout that can cause mental stress, compromise mental health, and contribute to physical stressors over time. A 2018 study in *Nature Biotechnology* by Evans et al. (2018) points to evidence of a "crisis" of mental health among graduate students due to "key variables such as gender, mentorship relationships, and perceived work-life balance" (282). Studies in behavioral medicine and sociology have also suggested correlations between repeated experiences connected to overt and systemic racial discrimination and diminished physical health and well-being over time for persons of color (Richman and Jonassaint 2008; Williams and Sternthal 2010; Bichell 2017).

Additionally, fear of bodily harm due to physical violence is a less common but real potential barrier to activism. While teachers may not fear for their own physical safety, they may fear for other students, even if teachers do not witness verifiable violations of classroom policies or university honor codes; as a result, the prospect of creating any kind of conflict in classrooms may not seem worth it. The white supremacist rally that transpired at the University of Virginia[1] in 2017 and the multiple appearances by Richard Spencer on college campuses[2] serve as evidence of how hateful rhetoric can make landfall at college campuses, resulting in violence and fatalities. Because many teacher-training programs work through a substantial amount of material in a short period of time, less time is devoted to discussions of subjectivity or conflict management than many writing program administrators desire. While new teachers may be encouraged to contact appropriate parties when conflicts arise, best practices are hard to agree upon and moments similar to the one I experienced are often dealt with through lore and peer-to-peer discussions, adding to a sense of uncertainty and personal shame when writing teachers have to address hateful or racist speech in student writing or in the classroom.

Best practices dealing with a racist system that originate in a racist system are complicated. Inoue states, “So it is the structures that create that language and the structures that train teachers and prospective teachers to become teachers and then to perpetuate those and, in some ways, many of us we’ve painted ourselves into a corner. Those are the dispositions that we have. So what other standards are there?” (qtd. in Stachiowiak 2018). Generally, a small portion of GTA training is spent ←148 | 149→talking about teacher and student subjectivity and relationality. Yet, the teaching of undergraduates occurs in a system that is organized, at least in part, by white people ill-equipped to address their own and their students’ racist speech.

The work we and our students do is embedded in gender, race, and class systems. As Micciche (2002) states, “The work we do has an affective dimension that is not outside politics or ideology” (437). Moreover, “student work is also a training ground for emotional dispositions that coincide with gender, race, class and other locations in the social structure” (Micciche 2002, 438). In the writing classroom, we are not merely asking students to produce texts but to produce themselves and others, and we are also asking them to communicate from a position of subjectivity that *will* at certain points make itself known in the classroom. While we are reckoning with our subjectivities as teachers, students are undergoing similar struggles, and the process may not always seem wholly positive. Part of the work of critical pedagogy is accepting how uneven or uncomfortable that work may be.

And the work is not just recognizing discomfort. The work is also questioning what keeps many of us, especially those of us who identify as white, complicit in the structures of white supremacy. In my case, I failed at being enough of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes as a “race traitor.” Bonilla-Silva states that social movements need “a large cohort of anti-racist whites to begin challenging whites [sic] color-blind nonsense from within," and that social movements need "whites willing to tell the world when whites do or say things that disadvantage minority groups" (229–230). Committing to critical pedagogy and social justice is a continual process of resisting both comfort and complicity—with the understanding that we may fail, and yet must re-commit to the process.

CONCLUSION: CHOOSING TO STAY COMMITTED

We remain committed to social justice goals for many reasons; we may feel we have no choice, that we cannot remain unresponsive while injustice occurs. Linda Alcoff (1991) argues that refusing to participate within discourse for fear of overstepping boundaries is not a viable option because "[t];he major problem with such a retreat is that it significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity" (17–18). Since these moments of failure occurred, I have not retreated from critical pedagogy, but I would say that my approach to classroom teaching has become more thoughtful. I wish I could say that I was able to find a satisfying response or an antidote to these failures, but mostly I just have more questions. How much is too much? What content should I focus on in class? What I have done since these moments is more emphatically discuss the civility clause in my syllabus at the beginning of the semester, and I've noted a willingness in myself to back off sooner during classroom discussions if I feel like I am pressing a single conclusion ←149 | 150→too far—and, I am still searching for ways to address social issues ethically in the classroom. I've also tried to grapple with my role as complicit in the systems that support both white mediocrity and white supremacy, while simultaneously considering myself as someone who practices critical pedagogy and is committed to working towards justice.

While I may purport to be committed to justice, I recognize that I am a participant in a system I want to resist. By virtue of that participation, the reenactment of ideologies that harm our students and that harm ourselves may be hard to avoid. Bearing witness to discomfort and harm is part of acknowledging that reality, but to state there is a flawed system that influences our experiences is not to say that there is not space for individual accountability and agency. How to engage the system is not always clear and the risks involved may not be initially visible. Deciding whether or not to engage socially unjust systems (and how) is challenging emotionally, and if we add inadequate labor conditions into the mix, burnout is a real possibility, which can be markedly worse for marginalized persons and people of color. Burnout may add to reasons to avoid conflict, but we may be avoiding conflict for fear of harm—bodily harm included—and no standard protocol exists for how to address these conflicts or questions of subjectivity. Grappling with our own subjectivities and that of our students may not always be a pleasant reckoning, but I argue that staying committed to critical pedagogy means doing our best not to look away.

NOTES

1. In 2017, a group of white supremacists gathered at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia for a “Unite The Right” rally. The rally tragically culminated in the death of one young counter-protester, Heather Heyer (see Heim 2017).
2. Richard Spencer is an American white supremacist and the president of a white supremacist think tank called the National Policy Institute, who invited himself to speak at a number of US colleges in 2017 (see Bauer-Wolf 2017).

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Messy Processes Into and Out of Failure: Professional Identities and Open-Access Writers

CASSANDRA PHILLIPS AND JOANNE BAIRD GIORDANO

In October 2017, we were finishing longitudinal research and institutional assessment activities examining the effects of more than a decade of intensive program development work that we had engaged in with colleagues to improve the academic success of students and the working lives of instructors in a statewide open-access program. Our work as the writing program administrator and developmental reading and writing coordinator for the University of Wisconsin’s two-year campuses had taken us through a series of professional accomplishments at the local and national levels, accompanied by major setbacks, including punishing budget cuts, reduced resources, loss of employment for program instructors, low morale, and gender discrimination. Nevertheless, we were feeling positive about our program, our successes in improving working conditions and professional support for some of our contingent faculty, our individual work with students, and the insights that we were learning from our research that we could apply to our teaching. We were motivated to finish our research and use it to continue improving teaching and learning in our program. We had also recently received two national awards for program excellence, and our work with co-authors had informed national conversations about writing course placement and teaching English in two-year colleges. Despite a significant toll on our time, energy, and resilience, the setbacks we faced seemed like temporary obstacles that were possible to overcome.

Working as two-year college writing instructors and program coordinators in the educational battleground state of Wisconsin (see Johnson 2018; Kelderman 2015), we were accustomed to being underfunded, underestimated, and ←153 | 154→overworked. Then through rumors on Facebook leaked by the press, we learned that our state system was dissolving our institution and merging our thirteen campuses and online program with four-year institutions. Within a week, we knew that the program we had developed and that was the focus of our professional lives and identities would no longer exist. Later, we learned that our program coordinator positions would be eliminated and that some of our colleagues and students would now be affiliated with institutions that either (a) lacked the faculty expertise or interest to continue investing energy into developing programs for underprepared students or (b) were led by administrators who had no interest in making a commitment to open-access education. After over a decade of experiencing many failures (along with successes), the dissolving of our institution and elimination of our program seemed, for us, to be a failure that we could not overcome.

In this chapter, we show how our professional journeys came to mirror the experiences of some of our students at open-access campuses who are both hopeful and anxious about the pathway toward a college degree. Like these students, we encountered insurmountable challenges and experienced both successes and failures, but we took away a valuable understanding of how “messy processes” can create a more sustainable path toward defining success both for ourselves and for our students. Over the years, we have refined and reimagined our thinking about working with students who, like us, experience a series of demoralizing failures throughout higher education. Most of the learners we work with would be excluded from a college education at other types of institutions based on the markers of success and failure assessed through admissions processes. We will explain how professional setbacks helped us reframe our own professional identities to value inherently messy processes and unexpected journeys that result from perceived failures.

OPEN-ACCESS EDUCATION AND PREDISPOSITIONS TOWARD FAILURE

Our professional experiences with failure feel especially consequential given the challenges our students face. Many (not all) of our students in reading and writing courses at open-admissions campuses come from educational backgrounds and life conditions that required them to face multiple setbacks before enrolling in college. Many have been discouraged from attending college by teachers, peers, or family—or, more frequently, by poor grades, low standardized test scores, and other traditional measures of academic performance and potential. Most have limited economic resources, and many face or have experienced hunger, housing insecurity and homelessness, and employment instability both before and during their time in ←154 | 155→college. Some are dealing with lifelong effects of personal tragedies—for example, the death of both parents or a child, family disownment, murdered loved ones, sexual assault, domestic violence, stabbings and shootings, incarceration, house fires, and ethnic cleansings. Many experience or have experienced physical and mental disabilities, health problems, and addictions, and many lack adequate healthcare or other supportive resources. Others are recovering from the physical and psychological aftereffects of war either as members of the military or as refugees.

These life adversities are not hypothetical. They are the real experiences of students we have taught and continue to teach on open-access campuses and online. They are not isolated incidents but are a routine part of what shapes our teaching and our students' pathways and experiences in higher education, influencing their available time, energy, support structures, and access to resources. A disproportionate percentage of our students who have faced complex life challenges begin college in developmental education instead of credit-bearing courses primarily because their life circumstances made it difficult for them to develop sufficient proficiency as readers, writers, and learners in their K-12 education. Although practically everyone who teaches in higher education has some students with similar experiences, *a majority* of the students we have taught in developmental education at a two-year college have had life experiences like those described above. These experiences do not define who they are, but they complicate students' educational experiences, frequently interfere with learning, and often influence how others define them. And they are part of the reasons why our students begin college at an open-admissions institution rather than a campus with admissions standards that require more stable life circumstances and access to economic and social resources.

For these reasons, many of our students feel that they are predisposed to fail as college writers. In our research and teaching, we have encountered hundreds of students who come to college conceptualizing writing as a series of inherent failures or believing that academic failure is inevitable. When we read our own students' reflective writing or collect similar data for research projects, we often read about the anxiety that comes with attending college. For instance, one student wrote, "I personally feel that I was set up for failure," and another stated, "My past experiences have not been very pleasant. I have not had fun with my past writing. For that reason I do not enjoy it now, and I don't look forward to it." These statements illustrate two of the many ways students communicate their fears of taking a college writing course (see Phillips et al. 2019 for further discussion of this particular research project). These reflections from students are the norm and not the exception in the reflections that we read. Over time, our repeated encounters with students who frame their own learning processes and experiences in terms of failure (especially in contrast to our students from more privileged backgrounds who articulately describe and advocate for their writing strengths and successes) have ←155 | 156→strongly informed our thinking and transformed the way we teach writing and our vision of a writing course.

Some level of expected failure is inherently built into the work of teaching reading and writing at an open-admissions institution because of both the high academic needs of students who enroll and the limited public resources available to support those students. While open-admissions writing programs like ours can do much to reverse students' perceptions of writing as inevitable failure and teach them how to become successful writers, the place of two-year colleges and open-access campuses within the hierarchical structure of higher education can create a fragile line between postsecondary success and failure. For example, before it was dismantled, our statewide two-year institution received a much lower percentage of public funding in relation to the size of our student population, while the most selective research institution in the state received the most funding. Our institution enrolled by far the highest percentage of underprepared students in our state system based on standardized test scores, high school quartile, and other factors in their educational background while operating with the fewest resources to support those students. Our students had access to limited tutoring resources in comparison to students in our state who met more selective admissions standards at four-year universities, and some of the two-year campuses in our institution lacked professional oversight for writing centers or had no writing centers at all. The fate of two-year colleges is often inextricably linked to public funding because they are less able to raise money through out-of-state tuition dollars, athletics, international student programs, and other revenue streams more frequently available at four-year universities.

In an austerity environment, the two-year college campuses in Wisconsin bore a disproportionate load of state education cuts. In earlier rounds of reducing institutional budgets, our state system imposed cuts on two-year campuses that were equal to the cuts made to four-year universities even though we had less funding and far fewer resources to begin with. What little we had was taken away, and it felt like we were stripped bare of essential and even basic resources for supporting student learning. For example, our students had a higher student to advisor ratio than those at the four-year institutions and no access to on campus financial aid support. Many of our students who were most at risk of dropping out of college were left to navigate their way through higher education on their own or to rely increasingly on uncompensated support from instructors in developmental education and first-year writing courses. We lost instructional technology support staff which meant that our students—many of whom are first generation—would not get assistance with technology related issues, including students living in rural areas who lack internet service in their communities. One of us personally witnessed a student make the decision to leave college because he couldn't get into his student account and no one was available to assist him when he was on campus. ←156 | 157→The emotional toll of working in such an environment is difficult to articulate. No matter what the reason, when we fail at educating students who lack a fundamental knowledge of how college works—and we often do—they most likely do not persist in higher education. In other words, the consequences of our failures were dire for our students, and we did not take that lightly. It is no wonder why many instructors in institutions like ours take these failures so personally—and we were no exception.

REDEFINING FAILURE IN STUDENTS' LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Calls for redefining failure are not new in higher education, nor are they new to the writing classroom. As Collin Brooke and Allison Carr state in

“Failure Can Be an Important Part of Writing Development,” student writers “must have the opportunity to try, to fail, and to learn from those failures as a means of intellectual growth” (Brooke and Carr 2015, 62). We believe that writing instructors in all contexts must conceptualize failure as an inevitable part of writing and acknowledge that failed processes and products accompany student learning. Our experience as program coordinators was that some instructors have a different vision of what writing is and how it works, especially those whose private and public conversations suggest that errors and failures to meet instructor expectations are intellectual defects instead of moments for learning. Others offer only high stakes writing assignments with no opportunity for feedback, revision, and accompanying growth. Portraying the writing process that way is a direct contradiction to what we experience as writers and researchers during the publication process. Most scholars have repeated opportunities for feedback and revision. We sometimes fail to get published, only to find success later after revising rejected texts, sending an article to a different audience, or abandoning a piece entirely but using our failure to inform a future project. In addition, our writing is rarely penalized solely for grammatical or mechanical issues; those “failures” are acknowledged but accepted as a part of writing that can be fixed through revision and editing. Holding students to standards we are not held to ourselves as professionals almost certainly guarantees failure, especially for students whose prior learning experiences have given them minimal or no exposure to conventions of academic writing and repeatedly taught them that they are predisposed to fail as writers.

Failure in writing development becomes significantly more complicated in basic skills courses at open-access classrooms for students who have previously failed to meet traditional educational expectations—often marked in a visual way through notes about their failures on high school writing assignments, transcripts, ←157 | 158→and other academic documents. Although our students come to college believing that their first-year is a fresh start, they typically lack the experience and knowledge about how education works to move beyond their previous failures as writers to succeed on their own. Students whose lives and opportunities have been shaped by educational and personal failures require safe spaces for mistakes and missteps in order to get comfortable with the messy processes that all writers use.

For us, part of changing our students' perceptions of themselves as failed writers required us to transform our classrooms into sites of writing production and revision. Our students frequently have trouble starting the writing process and moving their writing projects forward at home. We provide frequent (almost daily) opportunities for short low stakes in-class responses to readings and writing process activities that encourage our students to get work done, discuss it with peers, and get instructor feedback before leaving the classroom to work on their projects some more. We accompany increasingly more complex in-class writing and discussion activities with frequent reflections through writing and discussions that permit students to self-assess what works and what does not work, explicitly discussing their failures but more importantly purposefully thinking through the processes they use to achieve success and growth as readers and writers. Reflective writing refocuses students on the work of writing and their learning from projects rather than simply viewing an assignment as a product, which did—or often did not—successfully achieve the student writer's intended purpose and/or the instructor's expectations. These activities work effectively in our credit-bearing courses, but they have become an essential part of our basic writing classes because they model for students what effective writers do while also providing scaffolded support to help students move their projects forward to completion. This in-class writing is also an important way to acknowledge the work and home responsibilities of low-income and returning adult students and helps them understand how time factors into the writing process.

In our work as program coordinators, we worked to make these messy processes and products an important part of all developmental and first-year writing courses. In our own courses and examples of teaching materials, we changed the language we used to talk about writing to allow for a more complex understanding of what successful writing means. For example, when asking students to self-assess, we no longer ask them to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of their written products; instead, we encourage them to assess their writing strengths and challenges in terms of process and learning. Moving away from *weaknesses* to *challenges* shifts the conversation from failure toward parts of writing that they can control and change. Identifying writing strengths is initially challenging for many of our students, and we frequently receive early semester reflective writing from students who state that they have no strengths as writers, readers, or as students. However, the process of examining their own work and articulating what works in a text is ←158 | 159→a crucial part of the much longer process toward developing proficiency in writing and applying learning from one project to the next. For students who have experienced the majority of their education as a series of failures, we need to use language that underscores draft writing as "messy" or even "shitty" (see Lamott 1994). We make sure that students see clearly, through rubrics, assignment guidelines, or other articulated assessment and feedback measures, how sentence-level errors are a small part of what makes an effective writing product. Finally, we explain that learning to write at a college level requires challenging writing tasks, and we expect that they will struggle with writing.

More recently, we've worked to include more opportunities for students in developmental courses to practice assessing assignments and coursework. Compared to our students who place into credit-bearing writing, students in our basic writing and reading courses rarely have the experience to advocate for their learning through student surveys of instruction and other types of course feedback. Insights from students on how a course is (or is not) supporting their success as writers should inform how instructors perceive and respond to students' failures and successes. Feedback can also increase instructors' self-awareness of their role in the learning process and their own successes and failures in the classroom. This type of feedback can be incorporated into the classroom in ways that are less intimidating for students compared to a formal instructor evaluation process. Opportunities for feedback on what is and isn't successful for students in a course include anonymous in-class writing, small and large group discussions on what students are or are not learning in a course, learning questionnaires, one-on-one interactions in the classroom, and group discussions that ask students to make recommendations for revisions to a course. Only by articulating and normalizing missteps and messy processes in teaching and learning can we begin to normalize them and redefine these processes so they aren't considered failures at all.

REDEFINING PROFESSIONAL FAILURES

Our experiences teaching underprepared college students and studying their literacy development has taught us to redefine success. As Pat Sullivan notes, "we cannot measure success at open admissions institutions the same way that we measure success at traditional, selective admissions institutions" (Sullivan 2008, 621). We have learned that student success within an open-admissions developmental English and first-year writing program does not necessarily mean higher education retention and persistence toward a degree. What looks like failure from an administrative or political perspective (i.e., lack of a degree or length of time to graduation) does not automatically translate to failure in the life of an individual student. Certainly, personal roadblocks that interfere with students' educational ←159 | 160→trajectories and delay or stop their progress toward a degree can have a significant impact on an individual's employment, lifetime earnings, and social capital. However, students' literacy development and intellectual growth isn't tied to credit on a transcript but rather to their experiences with reading, writing, and engagement within a community of learners and the impact that those experiences have on their lives and uses of personal literacies. Those types of successes—though frequently acknowledged and articulated by students—aren't accounted for in the way that most institutions measure the success of writing programs and the instructors who teach in them.

Our professional identities have shifted in ways that allow our failures and those of our students to translate into more inclusive approaches not only to pedagogy but to how we define our own successes. Just as we build our courses and programs to provide safe spaces for messy writing and processes, we have learned that experiencing and understanding failures as professionals isn't tied to an item we list on a curriculum vitae but to the experience we have gained in fighting a battle and sometimes losing. We have developed stronger convictions about higher education and social justice, and in many ways have become liberated from the fear of losing what we have because we have already lost so much. We have found opportunities to share our experiences and brainstorm solutions to problems in higher education with other professionals across the country. We have taught ourselves that when we step back and remember the larger goals of education and social justice, then we can take the hits of the daily failures and keep going.

But in other ways, the systemic failures of our institution have magnified the loss of a program we worked so hard to build. It remains difficult to accept how something that was such a big part of our lives could be dismantled so quickly and so easily (see Phillips and Giordano 2016 for a description of our program). It is difficult not to have some bitterness over how little our work was valued at times. And it is difficult not to see (and despair about) how our experience reflects alarming patterns in higher education that threaten open-admissions institutions and the marginalized students who need them to access postsecondary education of any kind.

We are also haunted by failures that had a crushing and life altering effect on instructors in our program who had dedicated their lives to the promise of open-access education but are now linked to campuses where that promise no longer exists. The lack of resources in our students' lives was mirrored by a lack of resources in our professional lives, but we are also constantly and acutely aware that some instructors in our former program are similar to our students in their lack of personal financial resources and their ongoing concerns about having the funds to pay for housing, healthcare, transportation, and food. Although our program offered healthcare and other relatively generous benefits to contingent faculty, budget cuts increasingly resulted in instructors losing courses and those benefits ←160 | 161→often just a few days before the semester began. For many who had job security, the dismantling of Wisconsin's two-year colleges left them in perilous circumstances. Some of our most valued instructors lived in perpetual uncertainty about how long they would be able to remain members of our profession. Of all the professional failures resulting from the destruction of our writing program, this one is perhaps the most heartbreaking and painful.

Ultimately, we have accepted that we spent most of our professional lives devoted to an endeavor that was doomed to fail by political forces beyond our control. We had previously experienced failures and were able to achieve professional success through an increased understanding of how to navigate institutional structures to effect change. But it was an entirely different endeavor to move forward when those structures disappeared and when our campuses had radically changed and were rebranded with new names, new logos, new colors, and unfamiliar purposes.

In the aftermath of the loss of our program and the dissolution of our institution, we were forced to reimagine what it means to be a two-year college teacher-scholar. So much of our professional and personal identities were intertwined with our work as program coordinators and as advocates for open-access students and developmental education in Wisconsin. We had to repeatedly ask ourselves: Who are we now if we can no longer do our life's work? What will our professional and personal lives look like with the dismantling of the open-access mission that informed everything that we did? How can we create a path forward for ourselves with the loss of everything that we created?

Like our students, we eventually had to redefine failure as part of the messy processes that have led us to where we are now—and it hasn't been easy. We both retreated into teaching and the work of supporting literacy development not for an entire state but just for the writers placed in front of us in our classrooms and online every day. For now, we have found some solace immersing ourselves into working solely with our own students and thinking about their needs rather than the needs of a program. We are better equipped to assess and refine our own teaching now that we no longer spend much of our time supporting the teaching of others. We mourn the loss of administrative work that reflected our expertise and professional interests. But in doing so, we have stripped ourselves of many time-consuming service responsibilities and professional obligations to refocus our lives more on what we value most—teaching, writing, research on student learning, and our families.

However, we have also forged two very different pathways since leaving our former professional lives behind. One of us chose to stay in Wisconsin to work on a restructured campus, continue advocating for students in the same community, negotiate a new identity outside of writing program work, and build on relationships with colleagues on the joined four-year campus who are interested in ←161 | 162→similar work. But the other chose to return to her home state to start over as a faculty member at a two-year campus that promises to provide her with a more sustainable future as a teacher-scholar after it became obvious that opportunities for professional work to support open-access education would be impossible on the campus she left behind. These differing choices illustrate for us the importance of knowing when it is time to accept an inevitable failure and move on—and that emerging from failure sometimes requires an unexpected new pathway rather than staying with a messy process attached to an unattainable goal.

We have become hopeful, again, that our reshaped identities will show that while some of our endeavors failed, we didn't.

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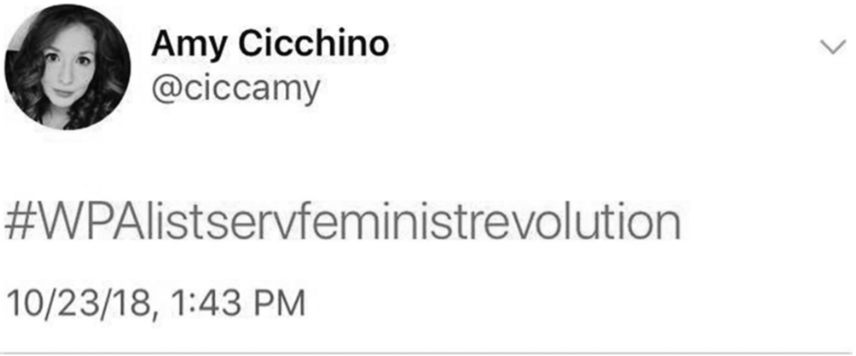
INTERCHAPTER TWO

Failure to Wake?

What #WPAListservFeministRevolution Tells Us About a “Feminist” Writing Studies

MICHELLE LAFRANCE



Amy Cicchino
@ciccamy

#WPAlistservfeministrevolution

10/23/18, 1:43 PM

Figure IC.1: #WPAListservFeministRevolution. Source: Author

In a Facebook post in spring of 2018, I posed an honest question to my academic colleagues: “Is the field of writing studies (or composition studies) feminist?” I had expected the other writing studies professionals on my feed to have strong opinions one way or the other. After all, writing studies scholars have been speaking to the “feminization” of the field (Schell 1992), arguing for the feminist nature of composition pedagogy (Caywood and Overing 1987), and critiquing acritical research stances (Sullivan 1992; Kirsch and Ritchie 1995; Jarratt 1998) for well over three decades. A number of feminist scholars, primarily rhetoricians, have argued that feminist theories and sensibilities have left an indelible mark on the field. Most visibly, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) have argued ←163 | 164→that the “shifting of operational paradigms” (31) in rhetoric and literacy studies (including composition) has led to an increased ethical and political awareness of our methodologies and to subsequent re-conceptualizations and revaluations of research (34). Similarly, Laura Micciche (2007) has argued that there has been an “absorption of feminist thinking into mainstream composition discourse” (17), and Siebler (2008) that “there is an inherent connection between feminist pedagogy and composition” (4).

From: Writing Program Administration <wpa-l@ASU.EDU> on behalf of Michelle Lafrance <mlafran2@GMU.EDU>
Sent: Monday, October 22, 2018 6:34:59 PM
To: wpa-l@ASU.EDU
Subject: [External] Re: Rubrics to Assess Writing Assignments

Okay.

Look fellas.

And, indeed, people on my feed had important things to say.

“No. And sometimes,” Cheri Lemieux Spiegel wrote.

“It wants to think it is,” Tracey Morse responded.

Lacey Wooten wondered whether a “pink ghetto” could be considered feminist.

Others who responded engaged with the question itself, suggesting that we need to ask it differently, exploring the terrain evoked and proposing that we might spin more pluralistic frames of inquiry in lieu of arriving at a pat answer.

“This is a big question,” Paula Nelson Patch wrote, as an example of these counter-questions. “There are chasms between questions of ‘is it?’ ‘should it be?’ ‘could it be’ and ‘how can it be?’ ”

“I wonder if rephrasing the question might be helpful: When or where is the field feminist? And whose feminism?” Rebecca Dingo added.

Wendy Sharer and Michael Hill both noted that the institutional contexts that support “the field” (“academia” as a culture and workplace, and the institutional policies of the Conference on College Composition and Communication) often undermine or prescribe aspects of our work despite any “intentionally feminist” leanings.

←164 | 165→

Full disclosure: I just had a whiskey with dinner, I’ve got a to-do list as long as anyone else, and national politics have me seriously pissed off and a little rankled lately, especially around gender-norms …

BUT WOW, I’m feeling just a little “mansplained” here.

As part of her response, Jenn Fishman posted a link to an article by Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Donnie Sackey, and Stacey Pigg (2011), who argue “that the relationships among feminism, scholarship, and other practices of the discipline, such as teaching methods and research methodologies, are oftentimes more tacit than explicit,” echoing Micciche’s point about feminism’s “absorption” in the field. These authors contend that “Feminism lives in the hidden spaces of rhetoric and composition.” The many sensibilities, critiques, theories, and practices we might call “feminist,” find, at best, an irregular voice “in the practices and attitudes of those who constitute the field.” In this argument, I could not help but hear a replay of the paradox that Joy Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman (1999) sketch just before the turn of the millennium: “[P];rior to the mid-1980’s, feminism seemed absent from composition but present among compositionists.… [M]uch of the creative feminist energy in composition’s history is not visible in the publications we searched: it appeared in informal conversations, in basement classrooms, and in committees on which women served” (8). How striking that the respondents to my post on Facebook revealed this same ambivalence.

Are we feminist?

To borrow Spiegel’s incisive reply: “No. And sometimes.”

CONCEDING FEMINISM

> [I];t’s not known generally how and where feminism first broke in. I use the metaphor deliberately: As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies. The title of the volume in which this dawn-raid was first accomplished—*Women Take Issue*—is instructive: for they “took issue” in both senses—took over that year’s book and initiated a quarrel.

—Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies”

This chapter is not merely about the impact of feminism on the field of writing studies (and composition), though that’s definitely been one of my own recurring ←165 | 166→scholarly questions in the last decade. It is also a disrupted narrative and asynchronous text that asks how a particular moment on the WPA-Listserv (an unmoderated email list that discusses issues related to work in rhetoric, composition, literacy, and/or writing studies) reveals some aspects of our work as feminists within neoliberal systems of higher education. I do not intend for this brief essay to read seamlessly or for the pieces to speak comfortably to each other. (I’ve left the size of the font used in my email as it appears on my computer—a nod to the ways my visual disability organizes how I present myself in professional and digital spaces.) Like Kristine L. Blair and Lee Nickoson (2018), I envision feminist praxis as “engaging and disrupting dominant structural systems” (3), performing important “intervention[s];” into how we do what we do with students, with colleagues, as those who run programs or oversee curricular initiatives (3). “Feminist disruption intervenes by asking what if?” Blair and Nickoson summarize. “What if we approach the questions that guide our work differently? Or what if we ask different questions entirely? What if we study populations and topics beyond those identified as sites of meaning making?” (3).

Though this in itself is a very tidy statement.

(Much tidier than my feminism often ends up being.)

But it’s not exactly “crapping on the table,” as Hall suggests in the epigraph.

It is the intermittent nature of feminist impulses I want to recognize here. In the moment of intervention, the feminist project is visible.

As disruption, a new space for further action is created.

So, I’d just like to note that 1) I hold a PHD in the field and I have a pretty noteworthy academic appointment.

Also, 2) I asked for examples—that doesn’t mean I’ve broken any sort of ideological code around our assessment norms.

Further, as intervention, as disruption, feminist action must risk creating *uncomfortable spaces*. It is only through this discomfort that we can rise to the bigger questions of our time: If we are a “pink ghetto,” how does this reality structure our discourse? What does that mean for the digital spaces we create? How does the work of our field maintain a status quo? Can we build intersectional coalitions in an era where racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism are increasingly visible and active in spaces we had once (naively) thought “safe”? How do we carry out our work in our classrooms, programs, and institutions so that we might make actual and lasting change? Because, of late and in my mind, feminists in composition have been a little too secure in their self-understanding.

←166 | 167→

Our disruptions have been tamed. Professionalized, institutionalized, defanged.

I’d sure like to have taken all of your classes when I was still a grad student and new to our field,

So, while this collection seeks to take stock of “failure’s unlikely popularity” and the editors ask us to consider how our discourses of “productive” failure elide the highly individualized material contexts experienced by students, colleagues, and others in our institutional environments, I want to open a slightly different line of questioning. Increasingly, composition scholars have reminded us that concepts like “failure” (or its erasure via positivist assessment discourses or cooptation via the “productive failure” movement) transmit sets of values that support a racial, gendered, class-based, and neoliberal status quo. As Asao Inoue (2014) notes, failure “is not just an individual, political, cultural, institutional, or social problem,” it is, rather, “a complex blend of these various elements,” and “an inevitable aspect of any writing classroom or program” (330). Failure as a concept can be theorized as an unrecognized presence in our work with students and colleagues in institutional settings. As Inoue makes clear, the many institutional, programmatic, and personal judgments that construct how we think of, activate, measure, and pronounce “failure” are reflections of broader systems of value.

but since I’m just crossing off an item on my long to do list so that I can have a conversation that includes everyone at our current assessment table (including those who don’t share out values),

It is this institutionality that concerns me, especially as we begin to tease out the parallels between an acritical adoption of failure pedagogies and the ways failure shadows and frames our explorations into whether we are or are not “feminist.” Though writing studies has had a long history of critically positioning its teachers and its scholars toward critical reflection on inequity, and many have taken up the liberatory possibilities of our pedagogies, our ability to critique the material nature of our work within institutions, our existence—as academics, as compositionists, and as feminists—relies upon the very institutions that impose hierarchies and inequities upon us. At times, we cannot help but participate in, benefit from, and reproduce these inequities. Our institutionality underwrites and circumscribes our vision for feminist practice whether we like it or not.

And, in many ways, our discourses of feminist “intervention” serve the needs of the institutions that support us—a Mobius loop of feedback, access, and material concerns. Institutions tend to perpetuate the systems that they were created to address, as many theorists will tell you. They tend to circumscribe and blunt our critique.

←167 | 168→

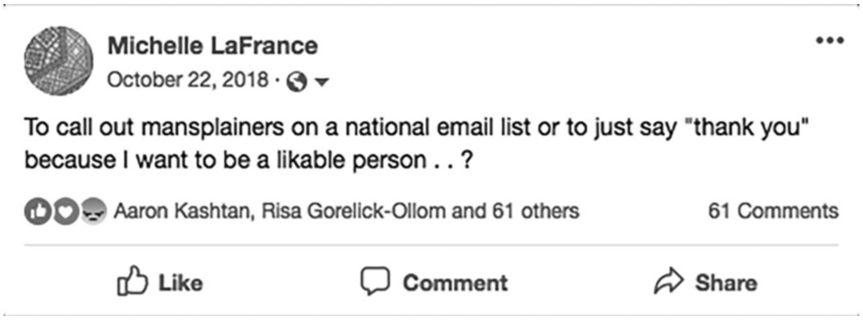
I’ll say that it’s exactly this sort of behavior that keeps many of us from ever posting to this list …

Ryan Skinnell (2016) argues in *Conceding Composition* that writing studies scholars have focused much of their attention on the disciplinary history of composition, concentrating on pedagogical movements and the broader, field-related stories that come of these generalized conversations. Our conversations, as Tony Scott (2009) has similarly noted, tend to remove the particularities of decision-making *within structures that are imposed*—we neglect to recognize the ways micro-practices are shaped by macro-systems of value. Looking at local histories and local practices, however, reveals a very different set of histories and politics, both authors suggest. We see composition emerge as a concession to the needs of institutions: Composition courses help institutions manage enrollments, student language practices, and ideals of writing.

When we see them as a product of the institutional environment over disciplinary activity, Skinell and Scott suggest, we ask a different set of questions. We may explore the quite divergent grounds upon which our practices take shape—highlighting the tensions and choices that mark our everyday. When we ask only “what if” of our feminisms and their relations to our work, I wonder if we haven’t already conceded exactly this same co-opted and institutionally demarcated ground. Might our versions of feminism subtly reinscribe the very dynamics we seek, as feminists, to change?

Apologies if this makes me come off as—well, any of the things women who "talk back" are accused of.

WAKING INTERVENTIONS



Michelle LaFrance
October 22, 2018 ·

To call out mansplainers on a national email list or to just say "thank you" because I want to be a likable person . . ?

Aaron Kashtan, Risa Gorelick-Ollom and 61 others
61 Comments

Figure IC.2: Mansplainers. Source: Author

←168 | 169→

I have been a little baffled about how exactly to speak about a kerfuffle I began on the WPA-L when I talked back to three male senior scholars. As a scholar of writing studies, I can theorize texts. As a feminist, I can unpack all of the many failures—of grace, of understanding, of compassion, of critical insights, of my white, middle-class, almost-tenured privilege, of race and gender and class—that bumped up against one another as I posted my reply. I can speak to my pleasure and dismay, pride and fear, as others then celebrated my "back-talk." Two of the men who had condescended to me apologized. Others lent their voices to mine.

One of the men involved then continued to post on the WPA-L, not only continuing to mansplain, but also using gendered metaphors to belittle the conversation. His confusion at having been called out was as clear as the power structures he sought to reimpose.

As the conversation spilled on to FB and the hashtag that now names the kerfuffle was brought to my attention, some spoke on behalf of the men I had criticized and others called for civility and listening. My email inbox filled (and I'm certain the inbox of the men involved filled, as well) with offers of private support. Women of color and queer folk stepped in to offer important critiques of white feminism, a feminism that infused my own message with layers of racialized, gendered, and classed discourse.

I write this piece three months later, still trying to hash out the fuller experience, thinking still about how we all might do better, thinking about how the event and our involvement in it will follow us, mark our careers, mark this moment in the field.

Among my many concerns following my email was my failure to be kind.

Was my message feminist or was it simply petulant? (I had blindly perpetuated the politics of the thread in many ways, using folksy language that itself drew on stereotypes of gender, race, and sexuality cast as humor.)

Would people think I was unprofessional?

Would people think I couldn't control my temper?

Had I actually disrupted a sexist narrative or simply shot myself in the foot?

(And see, look at that—I'm apologizing for setting a boundary, if that's not gendered communication …)

I still wonder what lasting work the lengthy conversation may have accomplished—a chain reaction of disruptions, interventions, and attempts to foreclose, which opened spaces for further conversation. You can see from the questions I pose above that I am still vacillating between anxious self-preservation and my ideals for feminist work in the field. This is the double-edged reality of activist ←169 | 170→impulses in the neoliberal landscape. As Maggie Doherty (2018) notes, “the box for acceptable behavior” grows smaller as women advance in our careers. Where do the disruptions of feminist activism fit into our understandings of acceptable behavior?

If we want actual, lasting change, our interventions must disrupt ideals of appropriate female behavior. We must risk breaching the boundaries of our professional ideals. Speak out. Shake it up.

CRITICAL IMAGINARIES: CAN WE FAIL BETTER?

> What feminist rhetoricians have taught us is to attend to our own levels of comfort and discomfort, to withhold quick judgement, to read and reread texts and interpret artifacts within the contexts of women’s chronologies, to interrogate the extent to which our own presence, values, and attitudes shape our interpretations of historical figures and periods. They have also taught us to attend the twofold challenge of being aware, not only of what enters our field of vision—what we see and recognize—but attuned also to our blind spots in order to consider with critical intensity what may be more in shadow, muted, and not immediately obvious.
>
> —Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*

On Tuesday, November 13, 2018, anonymous members of the nextGen listserv posted a collaboratively written response to the gender and racial dynamics of the WPA-listserv as they had seen it performed in the many threads of the #WPAListservFeministRevolution. The statement calls out “the existence of structural inequalities” and behavior practices on the WPAlistserv, including “tendencies toward adversarial academic argument that purposefully obscure the real issue or intentional sarcasm that sidesteps the issue.” The authors of the statement noted the toxic environment of the listserv’s culture, which “preemptively devalues the public work done by graduate students, NTT faculty, and other members of the precariat, whether through explicit language or as a consequence of tone.” The nextGen statement offered a road map for better listening, the creation of a safer space, and intersectional places to stand.

The nextGen statement is a productive intervention that offers strategies to readers and a call for sustained awareness of the cultures our profession creates—an example of productive intervention into the professional discourses and hierarchies that have long ordered our field, empowering some and silencing many others.

I really do appreciate each of your voices (at the right time) and pretty major contributions to the field, but, I’m done with the pile on.

←170 | 171→

Remarkably, despite a number of posts lauding the courage, critical insights, and generative work the statement offered, a small contingent of the WPA list’s senior members pounced upon the email, demanding to know how the authors of the statement conceptualized and included class in their assessments of the list’s culture. Exhaustion, resignation, and defeat were obvious in the few replies to these attacks that appeared on the list. Within a week, the conversation about gender, race, and the sometimes-hostile dynamic of the list had died out.

When I look at the WPA-L since, I see that patterns of communication on the list have resumed their pre-kerfuffle tone—the same self-promotion and power plays that initiated my original complaint, patterns that others had also suggested were symptomatic of the oppressive environment on the list, continued. Indeed, one of the men I had talked back to referred to himself jokingly as a “mansplainer” in the introduction to an email on the list just two weeks after the nextGen Listserv’s message to the list. Royster and Krisch’s suggestion that our “blind spots” mute our “critical intensity” are clearly played out in these dynamics (76).

As of this writing, conversations about the dynamics of the list's culture have not reopened on the list itself.

So it is with an "intervention"—the space opened often closes. Some involved are changed. There is opportunity. But those opportunities may not be realized in a visible or recognized relationship.

For now, I thank everyone who sent examples my way and encourage others to send more, should you have them.

Are we a feminist field?

No.

And sometimes.

But, because of the nextGen Listserv folks and the conversations I continue to have with others about our work, I cannot read our return to business as usual as a "failure." A model for productive intervention and a new site for action has been created by the newest members of the field who will carry forward this work. The #WPAListservFeministRevolution may have been a temporary disruption in our normal affairs, but we're only just beginning to see the widespread *and lingering* impact of those two weeks of frank discussion.

I have every faith that they will continue to open spaces with an eye toward authentic equity, productive critique, and inclusion. The changes initiated will inevitably radiate outward and take root elsewhere. Allison Carr (2013) writes that one of the powers of failure pedagogy is exactly this rhizomatic nature. "When failure causes *notice*," she writes,

> when it provokes fits of shame, anxiety, tears, loss of confidence, paralyzing fear and isolation—it exposes the bones and sinews, the unique and messy and sometimes improvised structure of the thing we're trying to create. There, we can see each thing anew, how it

> functions on its own and how it connects to the rest; we can figure out how to fix it; or, with this new knowledge, we can build something else altogether. (n.pg.)

And this is the work we take up now, as I write this conclusion and as I think forward about what we can and will do next. Those graduate students who saw their colleagues on the list stand up and talk back—saw who stayed standing and who actively created spaces for better listening and more intersectionality—have strategically opened a new site for our work.

It seems trite to say that these grad students will carry on this work into the next generation of scholarship, teaching, and discourse about who we are and how we do what we do. But, in fact, that generational reality is imprinted in the name they choose for the new list they have created. They have sketched a location that witnesses legacy, continuation, and the exploration of new discourses.

They will see who continues to listen and to participate now.

And, too, women in the field continue to talk (on FB, in person, through texts such as this one). We are writing and re-encountering our own ideals of feminist activism, a little less afraid of speaking out, speaking to power, and holding one another accountable for our learning and our failures. We have only just begun to see the longer-term impact of these conversations.

There will be more moments of disruption.

More conversation.

Witnessing and further interventions.

We will imagine the new grounds upon which we all may stand.

Good night,
-M

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←173 | 174→

←174 | 175→

SECTION III

Pushy Failures

←175 | 176→

CHAPTER TWELVE

Persevering Even When “We Are All Full of Mad”: A Lesson in the Value of Incremental Progress

JULIE MYATT

In 1920, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) Carrie Chapman Catt wrote to one Tennessee woman working toward ratification of the 19th amendment, “Life is not pleasant for suffragists in these closing days of our seventy years’ old campaign. We ought to be full of joy and thrill, but I am afraid we are all full of mad.”

When we pause to consider how long women and marginalized others have been working for equality—and how far we still have to go—it’s difficult not to grow frustrated, to decide we are fighting a losing battle, to throw our hands in the air and give up. Many voters in the 2016 Presidential Election were tempted to do just that as, in disbelief at the election’s outcome, they wondered, “What were they to make of the election of a man many considered an open misogynist, who had bragged of groping women and made disparaging comments about their bodies?” (Kantor 2016).

In her treatment of failure, writing studies scholar Allison Carr (2013) traces how failure to communicate effectively has historically resulted in a negative character judgment. Carr explains that such appraisals went so far as to imply “an individual’s failure of personhood.” No doubt many voters who had supported Hillary Clinton felt as though their candidate’s—and by extension their own—unsuccessful efforts to connect with the American people was a critique of their identity as women, a dismissal of their own personhoods. Some were “terrified,” and those who had believed they would witness the election of the first female president felt adrift after the election, questioning how to move forward and doubting whether their advocacy efforts were worth pursuing: “ ‘What’s the plan? Who will we be ←177 | 178→for the next four years?’ ” (Kantor 2016). This question calls to mind Carr’s notion of how failure requires us to “make [our] own path[s];.”

When defeat like the one experienced by Clinton’s supporters is read through Carr’s lens of failure as “something emotionally mediated via shame,” we can understand that the impulse to give up likely results from feeling “isolation” while also being “painfully aware of our relationality.” This phenomenon accounts in part for the intense emotions Clinton supporters felt following the election; they watched as their experienced, capable, and rational candidate was defeated largely because she is a woman, and they felt rejected and alone, yet acutely aware of how their lives would be subject to the actions of the President-elect and his supporters. Though a period of mourning was understandably necessary for some, most refused to give up. “When one [Pantsuit Nation member] said she would never vote again, the others rallied with reassurances. They would organize and resist, they said. They would become an effective opposition" (Kantor 2016). Following the 2016 election, women across this country have continued to demand inclusion and equality, vigorously and determinedly, by encouraging each other in digital spaces, by marching through the streets, by petitioning their representatives, by running for office, by repeatedly speaking out against the policies of a destructive administration and by confronting countless manifestations of male privilege. Their actions evoke those of the suffragists who preceded them, and yet nearly a century after winning the vote, women still seek equal representation and equal pay, and now they find themselves governed by an administration that not only dismisses women's concerns but revels in dismantling the progress women have long fought so hard to achieve. Such disheartening realities could prompt some to surrender the quest for equality, believing true equality an impossible goal rather than "the next logical step in the moral evolution of mankind" as Catt did (Weiss 2018, 18) or merely another accessible step on the ladder of progress, as depicted in Figure 12.1.

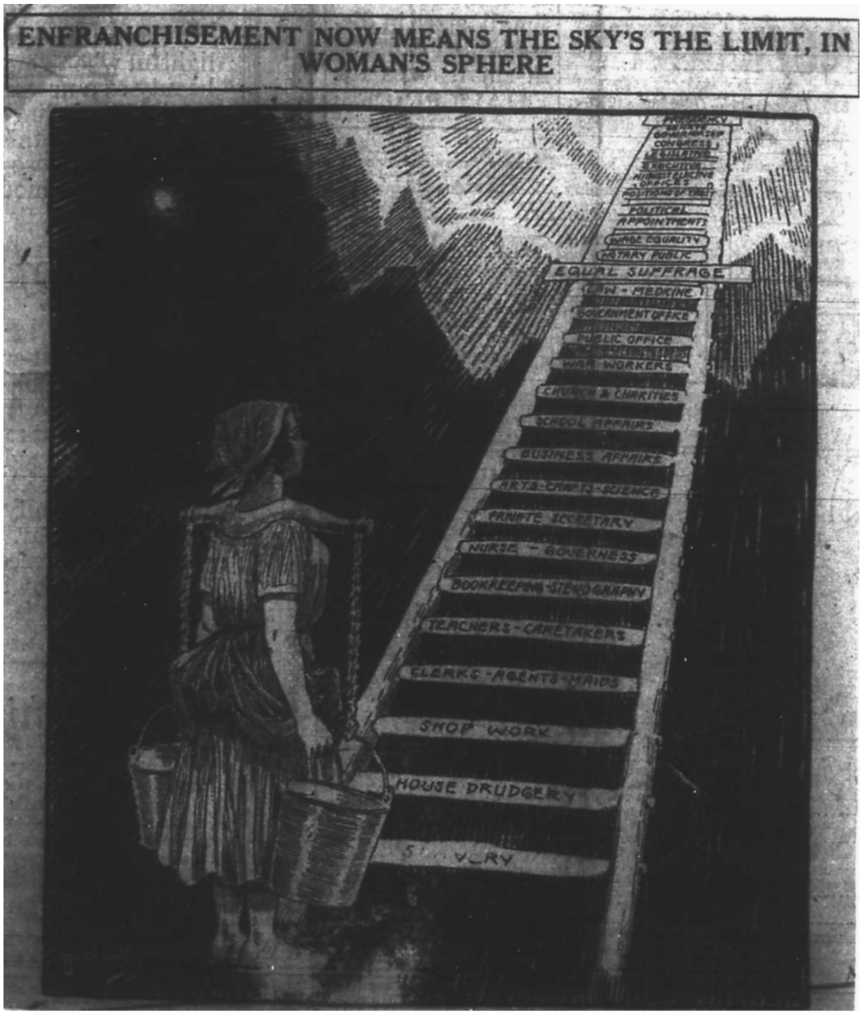
ENFRANCHISEMENT NOW MEANS THE SKY'S THE LIMIT, IN WOMAN'S SPHERE
PRESIDENCY
SENATE
GOVERNORSHIP
CONGRESS
LEGISLATIVE
EXECUTIVE
HIGHEST ELECTIVE OFFICES
POSITIONS OF TRUST
POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS
WAGE EQUALITY
NOTARY PUBLIC
EQUAL SUFFRAGE
LAW - MEDICINE
GOVERNMENT OFFICE
PUBLIC OFFICE
WAR WORKERS
CHURCH & CHARITIES
SCHOOL AFFAIRS
BUSINESS AFFAIRS
ARTS-CRAFTS-SCIENCE
PRIVATE SECRETARY
NURSE - GOVERNESS
BOOKKEEPING-STENOGRAPHY
TEACHERS-CARETAKERS
CLERKS-AGENTS-MAIDS
SHOP WORK
HOUSE DRUDGERY
SLAVERY

Figure 12.1: The Sky's the Limit (*Enfranchisement*). Source: Elmer A. Bushnell, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers 1916–1921, courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives.

So how can we persevere when obstacles loom large and our anger—or fear—threatens to overtake us? I suggest that we can learn about advancing social justice projects by studying the incremental steps toward progress taken by our predecessors. Some consider these efforts failures because they do not go far enough toward securing adequate representation and parity for women and others marginalized by white, heteronormative patriarchy. Certainly, women in this country have not come as far as we want or as is our due, but we must recognize failure as an inevitable—yet temporary—condition in the thorny context of social justice movements. Economist Tim Harford explores the complex problems present in today's

world, asserting that “Whenever such problems are solved, it is little short of a miracle” (2011, 5). When studying social justice projects, we must account for the formidable power structures underrepresented groups are inevitably pitted against and recognize how very far we have come. To persevere and to use our own frustration productively, we need examples of informed, strategic action, even *failed* action.
←178 | 179→

UNDERSTANDING HISTORY HELPS US COMBAT OUR HOPELESSNESS

This case study takes as its focus archival accounts of the suffragists whose efforts resulted in Tennessee becoming the 36th state to ratify the 19th amendment, thus winning women the right to vote. Attending to how suffragists secured the final votes needed for ratification despite considerable obstacles can inform our own advocacy efforts. A century removed from the passage of the 19th Amendment, a significant number of American women may possess scant knowledge of the long journey to enfranchisement—after all, as we know, women’s contributions to history are often left out of published accounts or are given only passing treatment. Understanding the challenges the suffragists faced can prepare those calling for contemporary social reform for the failures they will undoubtedly experience, galvanizing their resolve and spurring them not to give up despite seemingly ←179 | 180→insurmountable obstacles. Elaine Weiss, author of *The Woman’s Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote*, remarks, “It’s too easy to imagine that the enfranchisement of American women simply arrived, like some evolutionary imperative, a natural step in the gradual march of progress” (Weiss 2018, 2). Indeed, those on the front lines of this battle knew what a hard fight it would be. Marjorie Shuler, a colleague of Catt’s, described the Tennessee situation as “hopeless under present conditions” (16), and Sue Shelton White, a native Tennessean who worked with Alice Paul for the National Women’s Party, the “more militant wing" of the suffrage movement, wrote, "The more I look into [it], the more I realize we face a terrific fight" (19). Even the confidence of the stalwart Catt faltered as her final chance to see her life's work realized drew near; in a letter dated July 12, 1920, Catt told Anne Dallas Dudley, the face of the Tennessee suffrage movement, that there wasn't the "ghost of a chance of ratification in Tennessee."

And yet, Tennessee delivered the votes needed. How did these women achieve the seemingly impossible? How can we? Of the suffragists, Weiss writes, "There is a heartening, even thrilling, lesson to be found here … ordinary women banding together to become activists, keeping faith through decades of humiliation and discouragement to challenge an oppressive system and force change" (5). I do not intend to place the suffragists on a pedestal; accounts of how they sacrificed their sisters of color in order to secure the vote are well documented and should be considered a failure of the women's movement with long-lasting consequences for all women, though most drastically affecting women of color, their position in society, and their ability to advocate for themselves and for others operating outside of mainstream systems of power. For many, this marks the true failure of the women's movement. Even today our state and national governing bodies are still overwhelmingly white and male, and the women of this country remain divided along racial lines, evident in the continued alienation of women of color from the women's movement. And yet, despite the lingering effects of the suffrage movement's legacy of racism, the suffragists did succeed in advancing the position of women in this country. Without their efforts, we likely would not have one hundred and twenty-seven women seated in the United States Congress today, forty-seven of whom are women of color (Rutgers 2019).

TURNING THE IMPROBABLE INTO THE POSSIBLE

The divisions cited above mark an undeniable obstacle to the success of the contemporary women's movement, but debates about how best to advance the cause are nothing new. In an indication of how very divided were the women's advocacy groups vying for legislative support of suffrage, on April 27, 1918, Sue Shelton ←180 | 181→White wrote Catt to reassure the President of the NAWSA that no, she was not spying on behalf of the NWP. White, who was at the time affiliated with both Catt's NAWSA and Paul's NWP, used the letter as an opportunity to challenge Catt's decision not to push suffrage in the South, asserting, "I am more inclined than I would have otherwise been to lend 'cooperation' to the National Woman's Party, since it is working in the southern states and the National is not. If it is possible, I would like for some of the few votes yet needed to be votes of southern democrats. As improbable as it may seem, we can hope it is not impossible" (Wheeler 1995, 186). The NAWSA and NWP often seemed to be working at cross purposes because Catt and Paul possessed widely divergent beliefs about how best to advance the cause, with Catt cultivating allies wherever she could find them and Paul putting pressure on any politician who failed to promise—and, more importantly, follow through with—his full support for women's enfranchisement. In her rationale behind her decision to support the NWP, White reveals her concerns that more measured approaches to advocacy work grounded in conventional political wisdom would lead to continued defeat. And so, when pressed, she professed her allegiance to Paul's more aggressive group, confronting Catt with her own failures as a political organizer and quite possibly playing a role in Catt's eventual decision to attend more closely to the South. White's example illustrates the need for continued scrutiny of our methods and, when necessary, revision of the strategies used in ongoing social justice projects.

By 1919, Tennessee's legislature had granted women limited suffrage, allowing them to vote in municipal and presidential elections, but not for state representatives, U.S. congressmen, senators, or governor. Though a significant step toward full suffrage, the bill was highly contested, barely passing and meeting opposition from Governor A.H. Roberts, who signed only because he believed it would be declared unconstitutional, according to Catherine Kenny, as stated in a letter to Marjorie Shuler dated June 28, 1920. The notion that the bill was unconstitutional was championed by the antisuffragists but denied when the Tennessee Supreme Court dismissed the case (Weiss 2018, 31). By the summer of 1920, the fight for a national amendment to the Constitution had arrived in Tennessee, and the odds were against the suffragists, who had already tried and failed to win a number of other states. Even when state legislatures supported ratification, it wasn’t unusual for governors to refuse to call a special session, as was the case with Vermont, about which Catt lamented, though not without humor, in a letter to Mrs. George Milton dated July 12, 1920, “Nothing can give us that state except the death of the governor, and we haven’t come to murder yet.” As Carr illustrates, failure possesses strong affective components. Humor often serves as a salve for wounded spirits, and, as evident above, is one strategy activists can employ to exert control over a narrative in which they too often occupy a position of seeming powerlessness.

←181 | 182→

RECOVERING FROM FAITH IN MEN

The suffragists knew that serious opposition awaited them in Tennessee, and if they were to win there, they would have to tread carefully in a state already marked by division. Catt wrote Anne Dallas Dudley on July 12, 1920, “Tennessee has always been torn by factions in all women’s and men’s work, and it was these factions which defeated us in Delaware. The opposition will know how to arouse these antagonisms anew.” Here Catt reveals that she knows what to expect precisely because her organization’s efforts have failed in the past, and she uses these previous failures to inform her course of action. In a letter to Catherine Kenny dated July 29, 1920, Catt spoke to what she had learned about the importance of appealing to men of various political affiliations, candidly asserting,

> No matter how well the women may work or how effective their results may be, ratification in Tennessee will go through the work and action of men, and the great motive that will finally put it through will be political and nothing else. We have long since recovered from

> our previous faith in … men based upon a love of justice. That is an animal that doesn't exist. Therefore, the thing to do and to do at once is to get the co-operation of every man who stands behind the politics of the State of Tennessee and you must get the men of every faction … upon their work will depend your results.

Catt calls on Kenny to win men for the cause by creating a Ratification Committee, imploring her to recruit the "biggest and most important men of the state and do it quick before the opposition has made it impossible," and upon doing so to advertise widely: "Print all their names on your stationery … no matter what it costs. These men should be representative of all classes —presidents of colleges, editors, and owners of big, important newspapers, men of great political influence in the parties of the state, chiefly Democrats. They should be big financiers and judges of courts and every other prominent man whose name is known to Tennessee. Make your ratification represent the whole state." By publicly documenting the NAWSA's success in recruiting men for their cause, Catt demonstrated the group's ability to facilitate social change; even if their efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful, advertising such large-scale support could potentially shift public opinion, thus fueling future efforts. In Roberts, she had found a governor willing to call a special session, and to garner more votes, she sought to demonstrate that support for suffrage was widespread. The alliance with the Governor was not without its difficulties, however. When Roberts refused to work with NAWSA's Ratification Committee, instead establishing a committee comprised of his supporters, Catt, in a letter addressed to Mrs. John Gilmore and Mrs. James Esewell, reminded the women of Tennessee that his decision to call a special session earned Roberts their loyalty, urging, "We are his friends through thick and thin, no matter what happens." Having seldom had their support in the past, Catt knew that governors were key, and rather than despair prematurely, she sought to maintain ties with this influential ally.

←182 | 183→

And yet, her past experiences with mercurial politicians whose promises could not be trusted also informed her decision not to accede complete control to Roberts. She instructed her troops to keep fighting: “We, however, must acknowledge the right of our own auxiliary to work for the thing to which it has sworn its allegiance for many a year. It seems to me that these two committees can work side by side and ought, if their devotion is of a sufficiently high order, to carry ratification through.” Even though Roberts had pledged his support and the amendment had the support of Democratic Presidential nominee Cox, Catt shrewdly recognized the need for her organization to keep working on its own terms rather than entrusting ratification to the governor and his representatives. Refusing to be sidelined by those in mainstream positions of authority is one way of maintaining a sense of community and shared values even when those in power do not reflect or uphold those values. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed terms this type of collective effort a “memory project,” a way to “recover a will that has not been fully eliminated,” to “remember what has not been fully erased” (Ahmed 2014, 140).

In an open letter dated July 21, 1920, Catt directs the women of Tennessee to make a significant public showing of how support for the amendment crosses geographic and economic lines: “Gather local women to go with you to see each individual man; the larger the deputation the more impressive it will be. See that the papers know of your trip and the visits you make and if any man gives you permission to announce that he will support ratification, send it through the Associated Press. Get publicity whenever it will help.” The suffragists understood that building a public record of support for the amendment would be key to its success, not only because those pledging their support would be attacked by the antis but also because once supporters were documented, it would be harder for them to be bribed by the opposition. The threat of defeat by the antis prompted the development of larger coalitions; in turn, as more women grew active in the movement, their presence and growing political influence became harder to deny.

ENCOUNTERING THE OPPOSITION

To emphasize that social justice advocates often struggle mightily because their work pits them against those embedded in and thus able to move more freely within existing power structures, I turn now to the suffragists' opposition, whose influence had successfully halted ratification elsewhere. In 1912, the President of the Wholesale Brewers' Association declared,

> We need not fear the churches; the men are voting the old tickets; we need not fear the ministers, for the most part they follow the men of the churches; we need not fear the YMCA; it does not do any aggressive work; but gentlemen, we need to fear the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the ballot in the hands of women, therefore, gentlemen, fight woman suffrage. (Sims, 110)

←183 | 184→

And fight it they did; both the antisuffragists and the industry lobbyists sought those legislators known to be amenable to persuasion. Here we see that Catt's initial decision not to fund ratification efforts in the South (Wheeler 1995, 43–44) was not without merit given numerous considerable obstacles to full suffrage, chief among them the desire to uphold the traditional race and gender roles which served white male privilege. Anastasia Sims explains that the South was characterized by a "code of chivalry that revered womanhood while it restricted the activities of real women; a hierarchy of race, gender, and class relations that regarded any change for any group as potentially revolutionary; and an influential and well-financed lobby determined to keep women out of politics" (Sims 1995, 111). Some of the claims about what the enfranchisement of women would bring were quite incredible but sound not unlike some of the claims of contemporary nationalism.

> White southern men, self-appointed guardians of the lady and all she represented, used the need to 'protect' white women to justify slavery, lynching, disenfranchisement, and segregation. The survival of the South's social hierarchy—and the white male dominance that went along with it—depended on everyone—male, female, white, black—accepting the place assigned by race, class, and gender. Any rebellion from any quarter could topple the entire structure. (Sims, 109)

Here we see the entrenched and far-reaching nature of the power structures the suffragists sought to overturn. Though the advocacy work of Southern suffragists was often characterized by an attempt to avoid offending, threatening, or alienating anyone, the demand for the vote was itself a criticism of this system and a clear threat to the men in charge, one that placed the suffragists at considerable risk. “However nicely the suffragists tried to put it, demanding the power to represent their own interests constituted an indirect accusation of failure that southern politicians understood and did not appreciate” (Wheeler 1995, 46). In her 1916 address at the NAWSA Convention, Anne Dallas Dudley explained that “Much of the opposition to woman suffrage is founded on the supposition that men and women are ideal creatures—that men are always going to protect women and no woman is ever going to need protection against men” (Dudley 1995, 163). Obviously, the suffragists knew better, thus their determination to advocate on behalf of themselves and other women despite the strong deterrents of their past failures and their knowledge of the attacks that were soon to follow.

BRACING AGAINST CHARACTER ATTACKS

Carr questions whether it is “possible to fail without being erased, cast out.” The suffragists sought the vote so that women could be heard, so that their experiences would be reflected in legislation and historical accounts. And yet, by demanding to be heard, they risked further alienation. Given how maligned the suffragists were ←184 | 185→both in their local contexts and in the national media, it is all the more inspiring that women, particularly those living in the South, would devote themselves to such an unlikely cause. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler explains that many leaders of the suffrage movement were from the elite social class, noting that “The leaders of the woman suffrage movement in the southern states had to have unusual self-confidence and determination in order to take up this cause in the first place” (Wheeler 1995, 28). In what must have been an unsettling letter to receive (dated June 29, 1920), Catt writes Kenny, “The anti-suffragists will flood Tennessee with the most outrageous literature it has ever been your lot to read. It will contain outright lies, innuendo, and any truths which are more damaging than lies.” She continues, “We have warned all the southern states in advance of this certainty,” explaining how organizers in North Carolina chose not to act, and then

> When the flood came, they were entirely overcome and confessed that they never believed it would happen in North Carolina. They thought their state would be an exception as every other southern state has thought. You may think the same thing, but we tell you if there is any exception in the state of Tennessee it will be the first state to escape this kind of dirty, lying tactics. Therefore we entreat you to begin at once with a campaign of literature even though you think it will not be needed.

This missive foregrounds the harsh realities awaiting the Tennessee suffragists’ challenge to existing power structures and emphasizes controlling the narrative as a strategy to prevent yet another discouraging defeat. Catt knew from failed efforts in North Carolina and elsewhere that the opposition would say whatever had to be said, whether true or not, to convince the public and legislators the antis’ cause was worthy (see Figure 12.2).

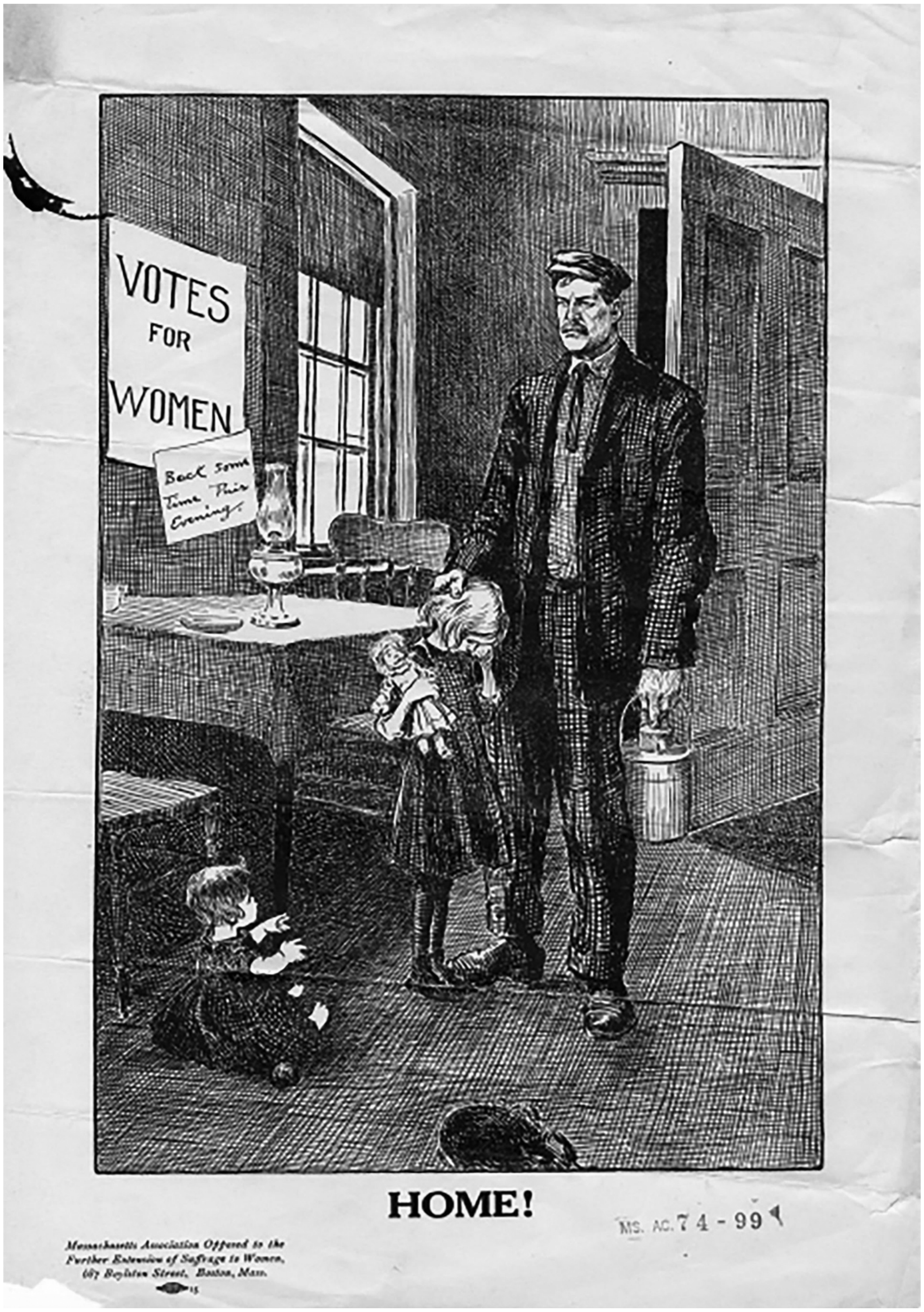
VOTES FOR WOMEN
Back Some Time This Evening
HOME!
Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women, 687 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass.
MS. AC. 74-99

Figure 12.2: Home! Antisuffrage Cartoon. Source: Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women Records, Josephine A. Pearson Papers, courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives.

And the attacks could come from unexpected aggressors; as Weiss explains, "Whatever your religion, it took some gumption to be a Suff in

Tennessee; it wasn't a very respectable calling. You had to grow a thick skin, you had to laugh about what people, and the clergy, said about you and what most of the other women in town thought of you. Your husband and children had to be able to let the nasty words and queer looks roll off their backs, too" (2018, 32–33). Carr asserts that it is its "affective quality that causes failure to *be noticed*." By attending to the affective dimensions of the suffragists' efforts, we recognize what was at stake for them—and we can imagine how intensely they must have felt each successive defeat. Time and again, they were told that their message was not persuasive—that *they as women* were not persuasive as citizens deserving the vote. Acknowledging their process of developing a thick skin—of learning to ignore what others thought and said in favor of what one knew for herself to be true and worth fighting for—could help us acknowledge the affective components involved in our advocacy efforts so that we may devise our own coping mechanisms. One contemporary example of such a coping mechanism is the reclamation of the term "Nasty Woman." Many ←185 | 186→women proudly self-identified as nasty women to show their support for Clinton after her opponent, ever fond of policing femininity, used the term to rudely dismiss her by alleging that she had failed as a woman. These women rallied together to turn on its head a characterization meant to perpetuate a particular femininity, one in which women are to look good, be quiet, and sublimate their desires to that ←186 | 187→of men. In this example we see contemporary women in the process of developing their own thick skins as they challenge outdated and restrictive notions of femininity.

BUILDING SOLID FOUNDATIONS FOR LASTING CHANGE

The suffragists' contemporary counterparts demonstrate that though our ultimate goals for equality have not yet been realized, it is possible to fail without being erased from the narrative. "Failure reverberates. It expands. And it makes visible what we often take for granted. In causing *notice*, it helps us see that there are other ways of moving through the world, alternative ways of coming to know lived experience" (Carr 2013). Following their initial devastation at the results of the 2016 election, the energy of progressive women was renewed; they marched, formed political collaboratives, and ran for office. Out of necessity, they discovered new ways of marking progress. The women's movement is nothing if not a lesson in the value of incremental progress—in failing but refusing to consider the failure final. Upon learning of her plan to include a reference to the women's vote in the Declaration of Sentiments, Lucretia Mott told Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous … we must go slowly" (Weiss 2018, 50). Today's readers might find this notion of "going slowly" laughable given how entrenched are the practices we are working to subvert—after all, mired in the political quagmire of patriarchy, we seem to have no choice but to go slowly. And given what the women's movement has accomplished, not to mention the deep-rooted systems of oppression it endeavors to dismantle, I prefer to characterize female advocacy groups not as slow movers, but rather as strategic doers.

As we continue doing the difficult work of challenging systems of oppression, we must, as Catt's example illustrates, be willing to cross the aisle and partner with unlikely allies—we must acknowledge that we need all the help we can get. But this doesn't mean we have to play the game on the opposition's terms. We can also, following Paul, apply pressure, making it clear that those who are unworthy of our support will not have our votes. And with each issue, we need to be honest about who the opposition is and recognize what they stand to lose or gain—this includes not only those in office but also our fellow citizens whose lives are affected in very real ways by the legislation we seek to advance. Rather than calling for broad, sweeping legislation, one strategy is to find loopholes in existing legislation and lobby for seemingly small changes in existing law that can make significant differences in the lives of those not served by patriarchy. As feminist icon and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has noted, " 'Generally, change in our society is incremental, I think. Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time' " (Carmon and Knizhnik

2015). Change is rarely instantaneous, particularly ←187 | 188→when those in power fear losing their positions of privilege and are determined to keep them, but those calling for a more just, more equitable society must take the long view—knowing that they will be met with significant resistance and will find themselves the subject of character attacks and ostracism. Others will try to cast us out, doing all in their power to erase our voices from the narrative. And even when the only voice of reason we hear is our own, we must remind ourselves that we are not alone, remembering that we, like the reformers who precede us, including the southern suffragists, are “part of a supportive subculture” and we must “judge [ourselves] according to the precepts of that group rather than those of the larger society [we are] trying to reform” (Wheeler 1995, 32). As our suffragist sisters demonstrate, each step forward marks some progress, even if followed by painful steps backward. We must take the long view to understand the struggle as worthwhile. In every failed effort lies the potential to learn about ourselves and what we are capable of accomplishing.

As is evident in the case of contemporary women, our failed efforts lead us to communities of support which offer encouragement and foster adaptation by providing “security, an inner confidence that the cost of failure is a cost we will be able to bear” (Harford 2011, 284). When we can recognize that our failures are not final but rather a detour on the journey to justice, we can collectively summon the strength to keep marching, keep fighting, keep envisioning a brighter future, no matter how impossible it seems. Acknowledging our failure, in many ways, is what keeps us moving forward.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You Google *Infertility* and You Don’t See Me”: Towards an Intersectional Framework Resisting the Rhetorical Slippages of Reproductive Activism

MARIA NOVOTNY WITH JULIETTE GIVHAN

INTRODUCTION

In her video essay “Family Christmas Cards, Rhetoric, and Infertility: A Season of Silence,” Kristin Arola (2011) describes how she arrived at the decision to no longer send out Christmas cards. She recounts how past cards she received frequently displayed photos of friends and often their pets. Yet, as time progressed, many of the images on the cards were replaced with photos of children and phrases like “from our family to yours.” She shares in her video some past Christmas cards that she would send, commenting how these cards frequently featured her “family” (aka her partner, her dog and herself). Sharing these cards with the audience, Arola claims that her cards no longer fit this genre. Her concept of family is not seen as a family by others.

Elaborating on this point, she unpacks the discursive assumptions embedded in the term “family.” For example, in the video essay, viewers see Arola (2011) type the word “family” into a Google image search, where she reports on the findings of said search. While some of the images contain differences in terms of racial ←191 | 192→makeup, all of the images contain children. She deduces that “family equals kids” (3:03). Such representation excludes Arola, who reveals in the piece her diagnosis of infertility. She explains the consequences of such a revelation, sharing with viewers, “Google fails me. Meaning, you, dear users of the internet do not tend to consider my circumstances family worthy” (Arola 2011, 3:19). For Arola, the Google image search of “family” reinforces that family rhetoric implies something that she is not. She fails, according to Google, to have a family.

Arola’s video emphasizes how infertility is an embodied rhetoric. It reorients the body and calls attention to discourses that normalize bodies based upon reproductive ability (Johnson, Levy, Manthey and Novotny 2015). The rhetoric of the family, as Arola points out, is something that her infertility diagnosis denies her access to. Representations of family and the rhetorical meaning of family become determined by the ability to have children. Through infertility one learns of the embodied consequences of failing to align with normalizing discourses. Arola’s discussion of how Christmas cards reinforce familial norms through visual representation illustrates embodied failure. In other words, her embodied orientation as an infertile woman unable to have children no longer allows her to participate in particular rhetorical genres that are defined by the presence of children. Arola’s essay acknowledges how particular cultural practices silence infertility experiences. For instance, she suggests the impossibility of responding to what is considered a normal, mundane question, “Do you have kids?” For those who are infertile, the decision to respond to the question with “No, I’m infertile” can often be met with notable cringes and discomfort. Arola’s point in offering such an example is to illustrate the conventional silence of infertility. Infertility is thus an embodied rhetoric that creates a series of invisible, silenced, and marginalized experiences.

Art education scholar and infertile activist Marissa McClure (2014), in her essay, “s/m/othering,” elaborates on the perpetual silencing of infertility that Arola’s video speaks to and suggests that prior scholarship has had a hand in perpetuating myths that the female body is a fertile body. McClure claims that academic scholarship, whether critical or creative, often reproduces a rhetoric of reproductive ableism, citing a multitude of works that conflate femininity with fertility. McClure argues that such conflation must end if we demand a cultural change around infertility. To illustrate her point, she uses the term “s/m/othering” to signify the embedded ableist assumptions scholars and artists frequently make in their work, suggesting that “while feminist artists and activists have long confronted cultural constructions of motherhood … bodies rendered infertile through either biological or sociocultural exclusion from parenting and the loss(es) associated with infertility remain largely invisible in both artistic practice and academic discourse” (McClure 2014, 252). This concept of “s/m/othering” calls for scholars and artists to intervene in the discourses and visual representations that assert an ableist ideology towards reproduction, what we call reproductive ableism. For ←192 | 193→McClure, interventions must begin with scholar-activists who teach and react to cultural narratives that reinforce the infertile body as embodying failure.

Building upon McClure and Arola's work, this essay reflects on infertility from the position of failure. For many American women, to be infertile is to confront social norms and discourses that link experiences of "womanhood" to those of "motherhood" (Ulrich and Weatherall 2000). These discursive connections reinforce reproductive ableism and falsely affirm the female body as a fertile body. Infertility, thus, signifies a failure to conform to these discursive norms. In this essay, we draw attention to how experiences of failing fertility shift depending upon one's socioeconomic status, sexuality, and race. Doing so begins to build towards an intersectional framework which may account for more nuanced and diverse representations of infertility and ultimately intervene in representations that fail to consider how infertility impacts each body differently.

To move towards an intersectional framework, we describe contemporary actions which have sought to intervene in discourses and policies that assume the female body to be a fertile body. While disclosing that one is infertile has become more commonplace since Arola's video essay was published, socioeconomic and racial challenges remain. Specifically, while fertility treatments have become more mainstream, socioeconomic and racial barriers remain in terms of who can afford access to care. As such, we offer reflections from women of color about living with infertility. These personal anecdotes were collected by Juliette as part of an undergraduate research project. Juliette, who is a woman of color herself, wanted to learn more about the particular challenges women of color face when navigating infertility. Her discussions with two other women of color are shared below. Learning from their narratives, we offer an intersectional framework informed by John Gagnon's (2017) concept of rhetorical slippage, which could inform how rhetorical scholars may better attend to and incorporate failure into our narratives. We conclude with a series of questions to guide future rhetorical intersectional research and to address contemporary failures in the circulation of infertility advocacy narratives. This essay contributes to discussions of failure by addressing how failed representations of infertility may move activism towards a more radical framework supportive of the spectrum of reproductive justice.

SELF-DISCLOSURE, STIGMA, AND INFERTILITY ADVOCACY

In “Rhetorics of Self-Disclosure: A Feminist Framework for Infertility Activism,” Lori Beth De Hertogh and Maria (2019) argue that self-disclosure is a critical component of infertility activism. The essay claims that “infertile bodies are perceived as invisible” and often erased from any cultural representation. For example, ←193 | 194→culturally we are bombarded by pregnancy announcements. However, hardly ever do we openly discuss a recent infertility diagnosis or miscarriage. These reproductive experiences are hidden and shared often only in privacy. When one does make visible and share their infertility diagnosis with others, it is a form of activism in that the decision to self-disclose infertility not only makes visible the infertile body but also “make[s]; rhetorical space for others to self-disclose” (Novotny and De Hertogh 2019). In this way, self-disclosure is an activist rhetoric because it intervenes in reproductive ableism, which assumes the female body a fertile body.

Self-disclosure as a form of embodied activism is not only a theoretical concept but is actively applied amongst national infertility movements. For example, RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association is an organization that provides support for the infertility community and advocates on their behalf. Each year, RESOLVE hosts a national Advocacy Day when patient-advocates and fertility professionals travel to Washington D.C. to self-disclose their personal experiences with infertility and lobby for infertility-friendly legislation. Such is important given that there is no national insurance mandate providing fertility-related care. The results of RESOLVE’s Advocacy Day are palpable and can be traced to a series of state and national legislative changes. For example, in 2016 the Mill Con

Appropriations Committee approved legislation to cover fertility-related treatments for veterans and their families. While not a permanent repeal of the VA's ban on IVF, the temporary repeal has sparked continued discussions in Washington about veterans' access to reproductive healthcare. More recently, RESOLVE's state advocacy team assisted in Delaware becoming the 16th state to mandate insurance coverage for fertility treatment.

Yet, despite such advances with infertility-friendly legislation, issues remain regarding who benefits from these legislative changes. Specifically, while these new policies have increased access to care, health disparities persist, affecting who can access care. For example, Tanzina Vega's 2014 *New York Times* article reported that fifteen percent of white women (ages 25 to 44) in the U.S. relied upon medical assistance to become pregnant, while 7.6 of Hispanic women and 8 percent of black women used medical assistance. These low percentages are amplified when situated in context with a 2010 National Survey of Family Growth which found married black women had almost twice the odds of infertility. Further, there remains a cultural stigma around disclosing infertility that continues to silence persons of color particularly. Rosario Ceballo, Erin Graham and Jamie Hart (2015) report that racial stereotypes of African American women portray them "as having unusual stamina, independence, and perseverance" that uniquely prepares them for motherhood. As a result, many feel culturally isolated by an infertility diagnosis and "remain silent about reproductive problems because they believe they should be able to handle these difficulties alone, as strong self-reliant women" (Ceballo, Graham and Hart 2015, 504–505).

←194 | 195→

Breaking this stigma is Michelle Obama, whose recent disclosure about her own experiences with infertility has provided a public portrayal of infertility from the perspective of a person of color. The decision to disclose her recurrent miscarriages and to seek fertility treatment to conceive her two daughters reminds the public that infertility does not discriminate. Infertility impacts 7.3 million women of all ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, studies of infertility across racial and socioeconomic lines remain needed. For example, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM), in a 2015 study examining lower IVF success rates amongst women of color, has openly stated that “more research is urgently needed to identify the causes and remedies for these disparate outcomes” (4).

To respond to ASRM’s call for more intersectional infertility research, we provide narrative accounts from two women of color who participated in a research project associated with Maria’s organization, The ART of Infertility. We share their stories to provide first-hand accounts of how they feel representations and access to fertility care have failed them as persons of color. They each share areas that could be improved in order to provide more equal access and representation.

ANNIE & MADGE: “INFERTILITY DOES NOT SEE ME”

Meet Annie and Madge. Both self-identify as infertile women of color. Annie is an Asian American woman in her early 40s living in the Pacific Northwest. Madge is an African American woman in her early 40s living in the South Atlantic region. Both women agreed to be interviewed and participate in Juliette’s undergraduate student research project associated with The ART of Infertility. Juliette received a grant from their university to be mentored by the organization’s co-directors, one of whom was Maria, and affiliated faculty member. As a young person of color herself, Juliette was interested in exploring how The ART of Infertility could collaborate with women of color to improve representations of infertility. In what follows, we include excerpts from Juliette’s blog post where she expresses her desire to explore intersections between infertility and ethnicity. She explains her decision to focus on the lived experiences of infertile women of color, writing:

> When I started working with The ART of Infertility project, I knew very little about infertility and even less about how it affected women of color. As a black woman I wanted to change

> this, confront my own ignorance and attempt to represent the voice of marginalized women within a marginalized topic. But I wasn’t exactly sure how. When I read stories from occasional anthologies or on my Facebook newsfeed (no doubt due to algorithms hard at work in my Google searches about infertility), I repeatedly found that the people described were white women or white couples who were pursuing medical treatment options.

Interested in investigating if other persons of color felt similarly about a lack of representation within conversations about infertility, Juliette engaged in a ←195 | 196→semester-long research project for which she interviewed Madge and Annie. When asked about her lived experience as a person of color dealing with an infertility diagnosis, Madge explained, “You Google infertility and you don’t see me, you see some white couple. There are these myths that we’re told about how we can pop these kids out, like it’s not a big deal and black women are very fertile. This just is not true.”

Madge’s statement affirms common representations of infertility as a disease impacting white women exclusively. In many ways, Madge expressed how she began to feel isolated both by the infertility community and by women of color. She explains that when she would go to infertility support groups no one looked like her. She shared with Juliette: “You feel isolated because there’s no one that looks like you.… There needs to be some type of research on how this affects women and men of color because there are so many stereotypes out there that are still seen as truth.”

To address this lack of representation, Madge suggested that we not only need more fertility doctors who are people of color but also more diverse options when persons of color are trying to build their family. She cites the lack of options to access diverse donor pools (donor egg, sperm, or embryo). Madge’s narrative expands discussions of diversity and infertility beyond the patient perspective, calling for others to offer infertile patients better access to family-building resources to match the needs of racially diverse patients.

Similar discussions about access to care and its impact on the infertility community were echoed by Annie. She shared with Juliette her frustration with the lack of third-party reproduction options for persons of color, explaining:

> In regards to third party reproduction, I definitely think there is an issue in finding the right match for you. It’s limited by who is in the donor pool. A couple years ago, our support group took a tour of the local sperm bank. There was an Indian American woman in our group and at the time, only one Indian sperm donor available. She wanted an Indian donor and that was her only choice. In the Asian American community there are fewer women who are willing to donate their eggs, so there are fewer choices. Women even get recruited from Asian countries to donate their eggs because intended parents want to find the right match. When there are limited options, recruiting donors outside of North America expands the pool selection. Asian egg donors are paid higher in some places as well.

She elaborated on being a woman of color and having access to quality fertility care, sharing:

> As an American who is the child of immigrants, I speak fluent English and I haven’t personally noticed any difference in the level of care. I do know, however, that cultural factors impact people of color in terms of awareness and the need to pursue treatment and consult medical personnel. For example, Asian Americans are less likely to seek medical advice within two years [of not conceiving] which wastes precious time. Due to the denial of their situation or distrust of a medical professional, they often will consult a friend or family ←196 | 197→member instead. If my Asian American sisters who are suffering silently can feel a closer identification with me when I speak about infertility, that’s worth speaking up for. One reason I’ve been so willing to tell my story is because I feel like it helps remove some of this social shame around something that affects a lot of people.

For Annie, making her own experiences with infertility visible as a person of color signifies to others that they are not alone. There is a need to break the stigma around not only infertility but the lack of diverse representation related to infertility, she explains further, telling Juliette:

> I’ve heard women of color in support groups talk about fertility stereotypes that weigh upon them, the expectation they face if they don’t have big families, the shame that they feel. There’s a cultural stereotype of Latino and African Americans that they’re very fertile people,

> so there's an extra stigma (and lack of community understanding) within certain communities of color about infertility. A lot of what we're doing is a movement; it's a movement to remove some of that shame and stigma.

Annie, Madge, and even Juliette's perspectives emphasize how representations of infertility fail to be intersectional. In each vignette, a shared frustration over the replication of infertility as a white identity emerged. Limited access to diversity also extends beyond the representation of the infertility patient. Annie and Madge, for example, both spoke about the desire and very apparent need for more racially diverse fertility professionals, improved access for racially diverse third-party reproduction donors, and infertility support groups that listen and attend to the diverse needs of all infertility patients. In short, their experiences reiterate calls made by ASRM to increase infertility research that addresses health disparities impacting fertility-related outcomes. Rhetoricians are well-trained and suited to attend to the gaps and failed representations that impact a lack of culturally attentive intersectional advocacy and health research. In the section that follows, we offer an intersectional framework for rhetoricians taking up community-engaged health projects to listen to the moments in which failed representation emerges as a way to call attention to gaps in the subject construction of the patient and their health advocacy narratives.

RHETORICAL SLIPPAGE: A CULTURAL RHETORICS APPROACH TO ADDRESSING FAILURE

In "How Cultural Rhetorics Can Change the Conversation: Towards New Communication Spaces to Address Human Trafficking," John Gagnon (2017) suggests that cultural rhetorics perspectives can bring to that work by demonstrating that "cultural rhetorics approaches move us beyond plain study and mere critique, encouraging relational accountability and active engagement in making and ←197 | 198→building—in making new meaning, new knowledge, new language" (3). For him, cultural rhetorics is aptly attuned to bridging rhetorical work with "the needs of a wider public that includes employers, citizen groups, legislators, and general readers" (CCCC Statement of Community-Engaged). He suggests that rhetoricians can assist with the wider needs of the public by paying attention to the rhetorical slippages of narratives. For him, rhetorical slippage attends to the "ways in which terms and concepts slip into more simplistic forms that fail to account for important nuance and detail" (7). By paying attention to the slippage, "we can reorient and shift the kinds of questions we ask in order to broaden how we understand issues of exploitation, violence, and justice, as well as surrounding discourses" (9). While his discussion of slippage is situated within the context of his research on human trafficking, we apply this concept to infertility and suggest that improvements to infertility activism and representation may occur by attending to how infertility narratives slip into simplistic, hegemonic narratives that fail to address issues of diversity.

Gagnon (2017) explains that rhetorical slippages result in the reproduction of a hegemonic narrative. Using human trafficking as an example, he explains:

> Rhetorical slippages result not merely in miscommunication, mixed signals, and inter-dialogic confusion, but also are made manifest through rhetorical rippling across cultural discourse and codified in/by the very structures that are tasked with ending human trafficking. In looking at how anti-trafficking campaigns negotiate, create, and engage, both through rhetorical slippage and selective representation, we begin to develop a deeper understanding of what is at play. (8–9)

The same can be true of infertility. Madge and Annie's vignettes illustrate the danger of infertility patient experience slipping into more simplistic narratives. The infertility patient is frequently assumed, simplistically, to be white, in a heteronormative relationship, and, through better fertility coverage, able to create a family and "beat" infertility. Yet, the reality is, as learned from the vignettes as well as qualified by the ASRM report and

New York Times article, such a simplistic narrative fails to capture the various challenges of living with infertility as a person of color.

Cultural rhetorics, however, allows us to question how narrative spaces can exploit dominant cultural discourses, which often perpetuate particular beliefs and fail to make space for other voices. In this way, my hope is for this essay to model a cultural rhetorics approach to addressing the "simplistic narrative flattening" of infertility narratives and call for community-engaged rhetoricians not only to critique the narratives that are circulated but also "engage in relational accountability in interactions with survivors and their associated storytelling, helping individuals find and use their own voices" (Gagnon 2017, 17). The example of Juliette's project illustrates such an approach and further emphasizes how other scholars ←198 | 199→can facilitate undergraduate research opportunities to mentor community-engaged interventions in the circulation of simplistic narratives. Providing platforms such as undergraduate research competitions and sharing the results of Juliette's research with ART of Infertility blog followers, Juliette's work is an example of moving academic critique towards more interventional public response. The narratives of Annie and Madge have been shared with thousands of readers. Juliette's work demonstrates the future of research that builds critical action around failure. Without such action, the rhetorical silencing and invisibility of infertility will remain. As rhetorical scholars, we are well-trained to critique injustice and narrative flattening and to engage in practices that create space for more diverse narratives to inform reproductive justice. Failing to build intersectional practices simply will not sustain the future of rhetorical, humanistic work.

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←200 | 201→

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Embracing the Ugly

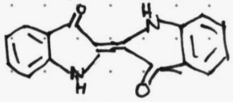
KARA TACZAK AND DEBBIE GALE MITCHELL

Embracing THE UGLY:

Kara Taczak
Debbie Gale Mitchell
We will Submit a multi-genre piece employing Bullet JOURNAL Conventions!

"Good teachers do (prepare students). And, I think good ~~classes~~ that embrace... how do I want to word this... **THE UGLY**. The things that people don't want to think about."
—Jess, first year student

BACKGROUND



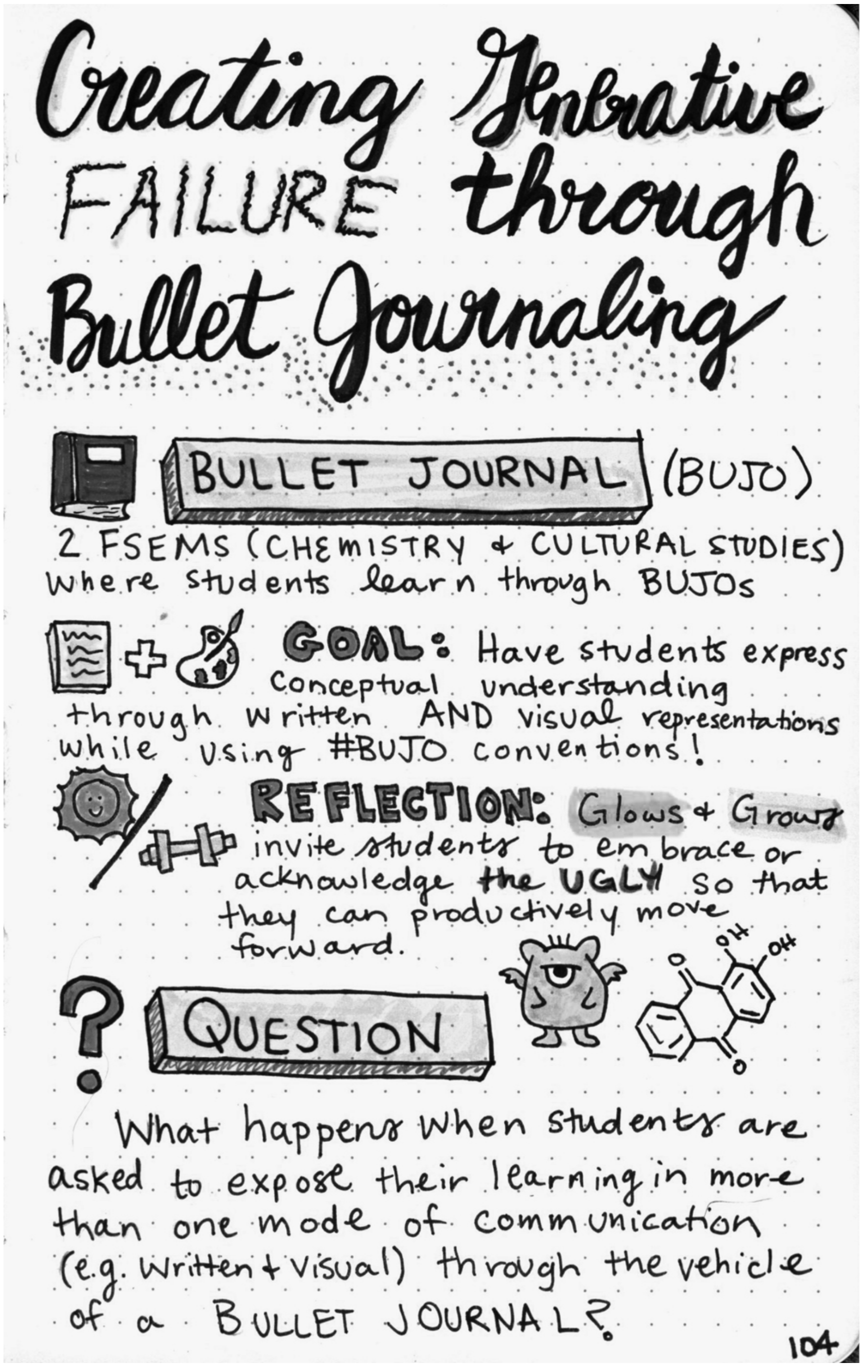
DU At University of Denver, First-year Seminars (FSEMS) are taught w/ content inspired by individual instructor's interests/ passions/ research. (Monstrosities, Chem + Art)

FSEM Learning outcomes: STUDENTS will become rhetorically savvy members of their various communities in college

TALK ABOUT **THE UGLY**: we discuss challenges + failures that students face

FEAR Students fear failure... *Different* learning experiences help students embrace + learn from failure

←201 | 202→



Creating Generative FAILURE through Bullet Journaling

BULLET JOURNAL (BUJO)

2 FSEMS (CHEMISTRY & CULTURAL STUDIES) Where students learn through BUJOs

GOAL: Have students express conceptual understanding through written AND visual representations while using #BUJO conventions!

REFLECTION: Glows & Grows invite students to embrace or acknowledge the UGLY so that they can productively move forward.

QUESTION

What happens when students are asked to expose their learning in more than one mode of communication (e.g. Written + Visual) through the vehicle of a BULLET JOURNAL?

104

←202 | 203→

As a chemist & spectroscopist, I am often searching for novel ways to visually represent the world around us. Chemistry is an abstract science and has been called the most visual of the sciences. Models are used to help us make sense of the molecules that make up the world around us. In chemistry, visual representations are relied upon to communicate the abstract. Being able to come up with new ways of visualizing what we cannot see is an important skill as a chemist. Creativity is not an inherent attribute; rather, it is a skill that's practiced and improved. Thus, as a chemist, I am always looking for ways to practice creativity.

As I was searching for a creative way to weave together many different aspects of my life, I found bullet journaling in spring of 2018. When I stumbled upon the modular nature of bullet journaling, it became clear that like a set of legos, with bullet journaling, I could pick which blocks I found useful & ignore the pieces that I found unnecessary. Within months, I found bullet journaling an incredibly helpful tool for both organization and creativity. Because of the flexible nature of bullet journals, I was excited to introduce them to my students and use them as a vehicle for creativity and reflection in my chemistry & art class.

Similar to how first-year students feel when transitioning into college, I often feel overwhelmed by my academic and life responsibilities. It can feel paralyzing with the amount of work necessary to thrive. I have also found myself repeating mistakes like covering material in a class in an order that wasn't best for students. Bullet journaling gave me a way to track progress and critically reflect on my experiences (with data that I had generated). By creating different pages in my bullet journal, I am able to practice creativity, generate new visual representations, and organize and track my life. Bullet journaling has allowed me to become more self-reflective and more prepared and organized -- both in-and-out of the classroom.

Debbie
Gale Mitchell

"We seem to know that the edge is where the action is, or the place you push things to for the best result."

As a teacher, an educator, and a scholar, I believe that this is true: if we want to push ourselves to get the best results, we have to know where the "edge" is and go there. For me that means being able to step back and mindfully reflect at the end of the year, honestly assessing how things went: what worked, what didn't work, what I liked, what I didn't like, what students seemed to like, and so on. Finding my "edge" year after year can seem daunting, especially after teaching for awhile, so I try to challenge myself to find a couple innovative pedagogical methods to try out alongside my established methods (as a founding member of the Teaching for Transfer curriculum in composition studies, this also means keeping the integrity of that intact). This past year one of those innovative methods was the Bullet Journal.

I am a hyper-organized person -- I make lists to make lists -- so I am always on the hunt for a "perfect" way to keep track of all of my daily, weekly, and monthly to-do lists, schedule of events, workout and nutrition goals, and so on. I stumbled onto the Bullet Journal method by accident while scrolling through Pinterest at the end of 2017 searching for fun and creative ways to keep track of things. I started a Bullet Journal in early 2018, so began my desire to see if it could work in a class. Bullet Journals marry organization with reflective tools and are flexible enough to allow for as much, or as little, creativity as one deems important. Creativity, flexibility, organization, and intentional spaces for reflections?! Yes, please! My "edge" for teaching in 2018 was to figure out innovative and effective ways to use Bullet Journals in my classroom practices.

Kara
Taczak

INTRODUCTION

> Good teachers do [prepare students]. And I think, good classes that embrace … how do I want to word this … the ugly. The things that people don't want to talk about, the things that people don't want to think about …
>
> —Jess, first year student

The Bullet Journal, BUJO for short, was developed in the mid-2000s as a type of flexible planner, formatted as a dot-grid blank journal (Carrol 2018). Ryan Carroll developed the Bullet Journal method because, as a child, he struggled with a ←204 | 205→learning disorder that hindered his ability to be successful as a student. He couldn't concentrate, felt disorganized, and at times, lost. As a child, he used journals as a space to help create control, which led him to develop the Bullet Journal method. A combination of a planner, diary, notebook, to-do list, and sketchbook, the BUJO seeks to make daily life more manageable by incorporating productivity, intentionality, and mindfulness together. In short, the mission is to help people become mindful about how we spend our time and our energy.

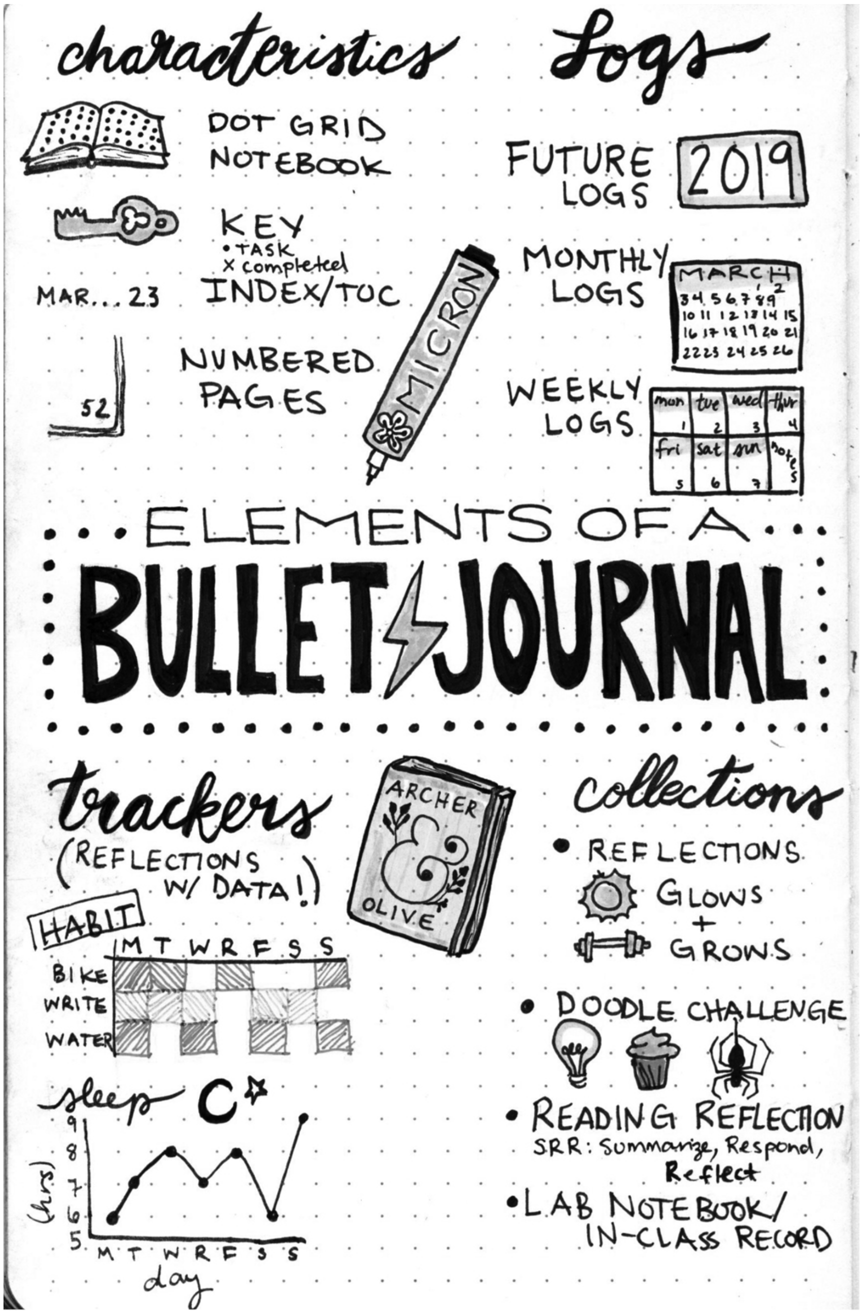
Since the creation of it, millions of people have customized the Bullet Journal method with most maintaining Carroll's original intent to "track the past, organize the present, and plan for the future." A simple Instagram search (using #bulletjournal) pulls up more than 3 million public posts dedicated to Bullet Journals. Each image showcases the unique ability of the BUJO to fit the person using it. This is part of the appeal of the Bullet Journal: It's customizable to/for each individual developing the pages to fit within his/her lifestyle. For example, a lot of people use their BUJO to organize their daily, weekly, and monthly activities and goals whether they pertain to health, fitness, career, social life, etc. Additionally, the intentional reflective nature of BUJO encourages a type of mindfulness that traditional planners do not, allowing people to track progress, understand that progress, and make changes where needed.

Since the creation of the BUJO, people have adapted Carroll's original design to allow for more creativity, incorporating hand lettering and even water color. This move towards creativity shifts away from Carroll's hyper-focus on productivity. And it's at this intersection—where creativity meets productivity—that our First-year Seminar classes were constructed. We had our students design BUJOs with a focus on creativity, productivity, and reflection. This work was also inspired by Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*—a compilation of Barry's creative lesson plans and writing assignments (Barry 2014). Our goal was for our first-year students to do the following: (1) to mindfully pay attention to their daily and weekly tasks, including, but not limited to our classrooms; (2) to thoughtfully focus on developing critical reading skills; (3) to deliberately provide a creative space for innovative thinking; and, (4) to intentionally engage with reflection.

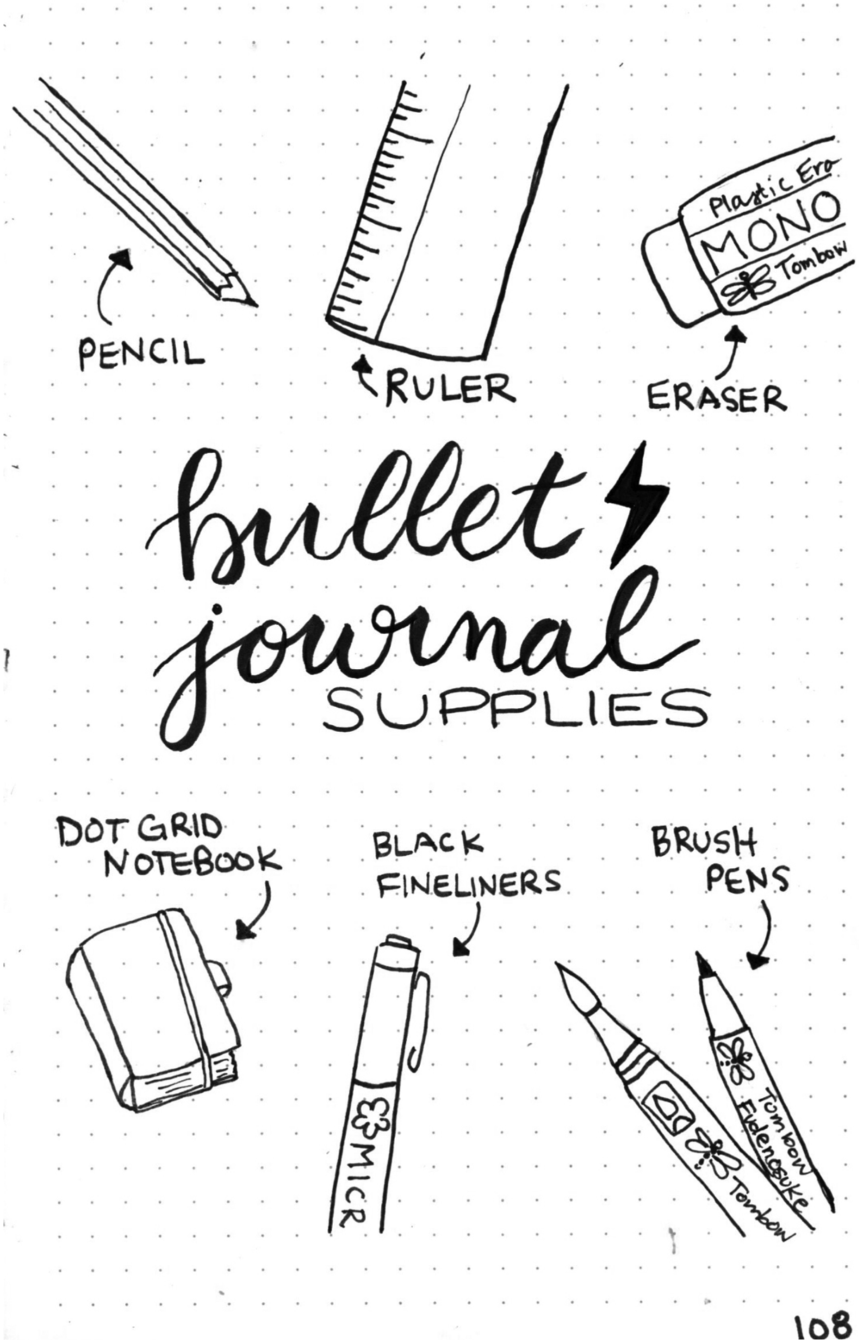
Our hope was to create a space where students would begin to expose the cracks within their learning, so they might embrace the progress and "the ugly"—the experiences and feelings associated with failure and challenge—that students face but don't necessarily want to reflect upon. And because students step into our classrooms with prior experiences and knowledges about what they believe learning to be (and how it should occur), they often struggle with learning that looks different, that promotes uncertainties, and/or makes them uncomfortable. To try and help with this, we embedded a specific type of critical reflection to create generative failure, moments for students to mindfully evolve in their thinking and understanding.

←205 | 206→

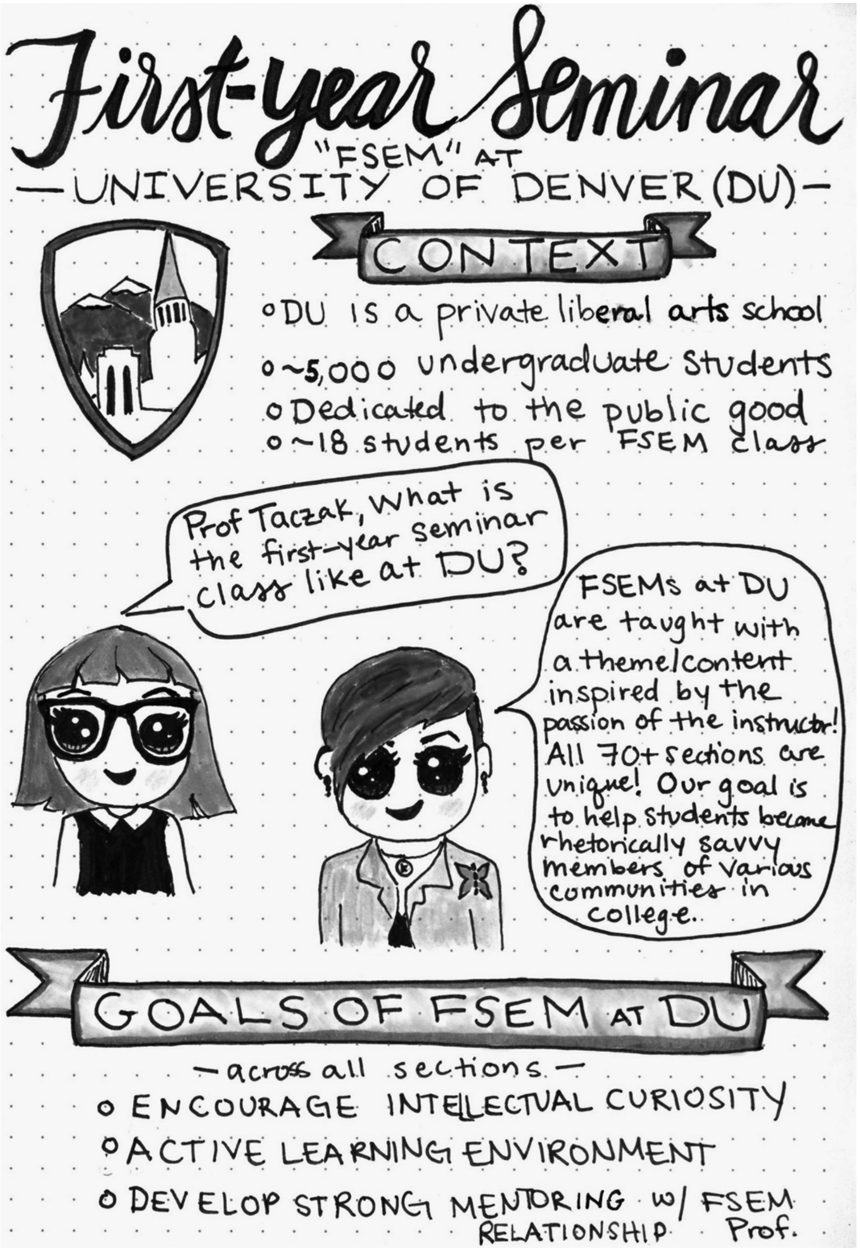
Our chapter, a multi-genre piece employing the conventions of a BUJO, argues that this form encourages students to expose and embrace various aspects of learning (progress and success; challenge and failure) as a way to productively move forward.

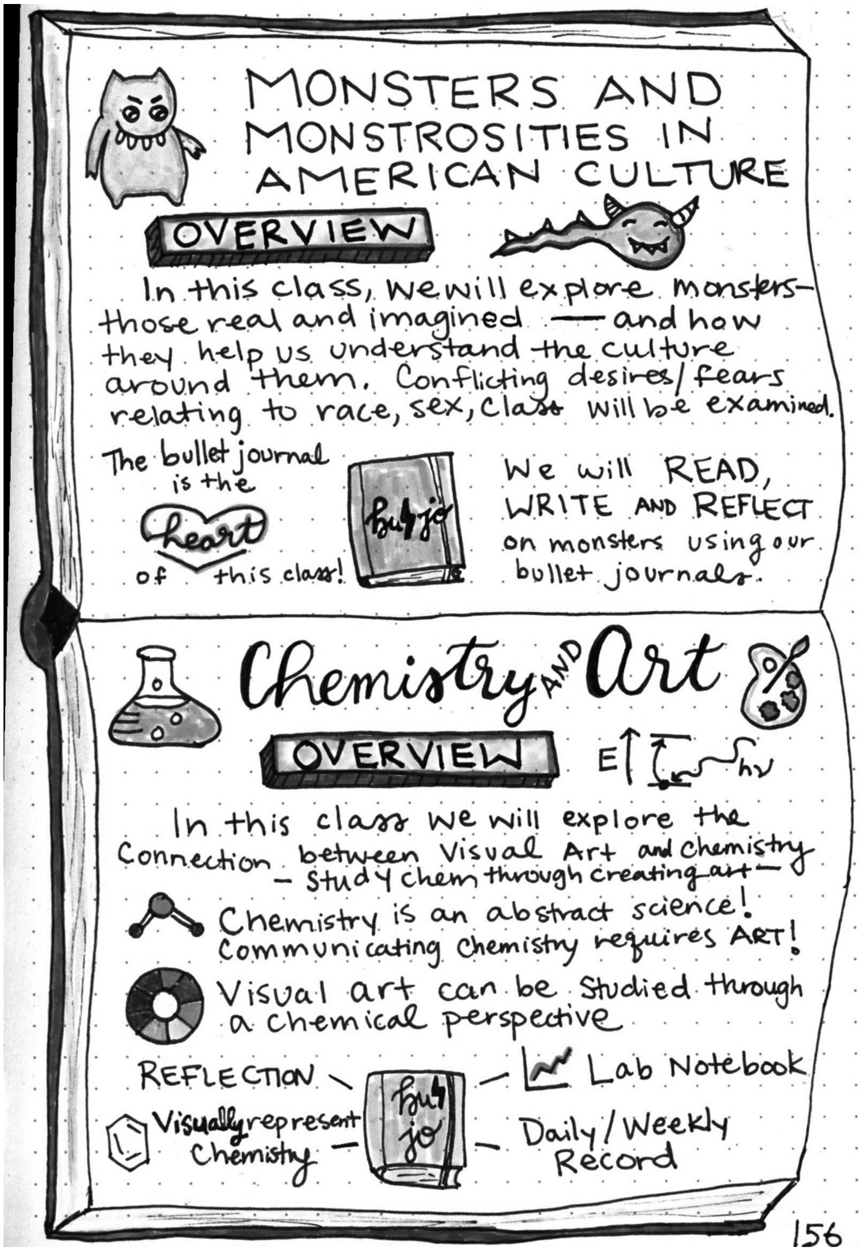

characteristics
DOT GRID NOTEBOOK
KEY
• TASK
X completed
MAR... 23
INDEX/TOC
52
NUMBERED PAGES
MICRON
Logs
FUTURE LOGS
2019
MONTHLY LOGS
MARCH
1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15
16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26
WEEKLY LOGS
mon 1
tue 2
wed 3
thr 4
fri 5
sat 6
sun 7
notes
ELEMENTS OF A
BULLET JOURNAL
trackers
(REFLECTIONS W/ DATA!)
HABIT
M T W R F S S
BIKE
WRITE
WATER
sleep
(hrs)
9
8
7
6
5
M T W R F S S
day
ARCHER & OLIVE
collections
• REFLECTIONS
GLOWS + GROWS
• DOODLE CHALLENGE
• READING REFLECTION
SRR: Summarize, Respond, Reflect
• LAB NOTEBOOK/ IN-CLASS RECORD

←206 | 207→


PENCIL
RULER
Plastic Era
MONO
Tombow
ERASER
bullet journal
SUPPLIES
DOT GRID NOTEBOOK
BLACK FINELINERS
MICR
BRUSH PENS
Tombow
Tombow Fudenosuke
108

←207 | 208→


First-year Seminar
"FSEM" AT
—UNIVERSITY OF DENVER (DU)—
CONTEXT
DU is a private liberal arts school
~5,000 undergraduate students
Dedicated to the public good
~18 students per FSEM class
Prof Taczak, what is the first-year seminar class like at DU?
FSEMs at DU are taught with a theme/content inspired by the passion of the instructor! All 70+ sections are unique! Our goal is to help students become rhetorically savvy members of various communities in college.
GOALS OF FSEM AT DU
—across all sections—
ENCOURAGE INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY
ACTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
DEVELOP STRONG MENTORING RELATIONSHIP w/ FSEM Prof.



MONSTERS AND MONSTROSITIES IN AMERICAN CULTURE

OVERVIEW

In this class, we will explore monsters— those real and imagined —and how they help us understand the culture around them. Conflicting desires/fears relating to race, sex, class will be examined.

The bullet journal is the heart of this class!

We will READ, WRITE AND REFLECT on monsters using our bullet journals.

Chemistry AND Art

OVERVIEW

In this class we will explore the Connection between Visual Art and Chemistry – study chem through creating art –

Chemistry is an abstract science! Communicating Chemistry requires ART!

Visual art can be studied through a chemical perspective

REFLECTION – bujo – Lab Notebook

Visually represent Chemistry – Daily/Weekly Record

CREATING GENERATIVE FAILURE THROUGH CRITICAL REFLECTION: EXPOSING AND EMBRACING VARIOUS ASPECTS OF LEARNING

Socrates said that the unexamined life was not worth living. We know from research across the disciplines that in one way or another, scholars still believe this to be true. How to examine one's life requires a type of mindfulness that comes ←209 | 210→from reflective practice as John Dewey (1910) explained, “the kind of [reflective] thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration.” For Dewey, reflection encouraged practitioners to think, *to really seriously think*, about a subject. Since then, many scholars have researched what reflective practice means for their particular discipline and their students. Decades after Dewey, Donald Schön (1983) helped to move reflective practice forward by providing a reflection-in-action framework which many practitioners still use today. Together, these influential theories on reflection suggest that “reflective learning seeks to validate the knowledge, skills and experience used in practice, and recognizes these elements as valuable components in learning. Practitioners are seen as active participants in learning, rather than empty vessels to be filled by the ‘expert’ trainer. This is an important issue in terms of developing confidence in learning” (Thompson and Pascal 2012, 314–315). Reflection, as both a theory and a practice, moves students into the more visible role required for active, engaged learning.

Building on these foundational ideas about reflection, we argue that a specific type of reflection aids student success. Reflection can be surface-level and bound to the classroom unless it’s taught to be intentional, encouraging self-awareness and understanding of each learning situation. Those moments of self-awareness and understanding expose the cracks within students’ own learning, including “the ugly”—the experiences and feelings associated with failure and challenge. We believe reflection should be both personal and rhetorical, and we tap into both by asking students to reflect upon their past, current, and possible future experiences. Reflection can help students gain insight into those cracks and the complexities surrounding learning and produce awareness of the knowledge(s) gained and what to do with them moving outward and forward. This, of course, is not easy to teach nor is it easy to learn, so the critical reflection we asked students do in the Bullet Journals encouraged generative failure. In the following pages, we explain what this looks like in practice.

Our Key Terms

Building on Taczak’s work with reflection and Mitchell’s classroom practices on prior knowledge, we define our terms as follows:

> Critical Reflection: Critical reflection is a “mode of inquiry, a deliberate way of systematically recalling past experiences to reframe the current situation” (Taczak 2015, 78). Reflection, both the practice of and the process for, offers students a way to understand how to make meaningful contributions to any rhetorical or personal exchange ←210 | 211→because it’s through reflection that one understands how to *create* active change. Active change moves students away from a somewhat dormant self-awareness to becoming consciously self-aware by looking backward and inward, so that they can effectively and successfully move outward and forward. This is not without its difficulties. Sometimes students aren’t ready for this kind of active change—for any number of reasons, for example, their prior experiences and knowledges, might be at odds (or even absent—a lack of prior experiences and knowledges) with their current experiences and knowledges creating a barrier for the learning (see Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey, 2012). Additionally, students may by uncomfortable with this type of reflection because it asks them to be vulenerable, and given their position as students, they may feel the risk is too great. As well, some students may not be developmentally ready to do this type of reflection. For these reasons and more, this type of reflection can become more of a means “pleasing the teacher” and less critical; however, when students are able to practice critical reflection, it places the learning back in their hands encouraging them towards active change.

> Generative Failure: Generative failure is a process where students use critical reflection to expose challenges or shortcomings in a variety of different experiences, knowledge(s), and/or situations. This exposure allows students to see where they need to focus so that they might be able to progress forward. Having students engage with generative failure invites them to document their failure as a way to “sit” with it—or to reflect over it—attempting to make sense of their learning. By documenting the failure, we are asking students to embrace it, not necessarily overcoming it, though this is certainly one possible outcome, but paying it time and attention as a part of the overall learning process.

When used in collaboration with BUJOs, critical reflection and generative failure work together towards the self-realization of when learning, experiences, and knowledge(s) are working or not, obtainable or not, understandable or not, and so forth. It puts the agency squarely back in the hands of the students asking them to step back, assess (and access), and then recalibrate their expectations based on their assessment. And this could be successful or not depending on whether or not the failure is something that can be overcome. The benefit comes from the self-awareness and self-realization: there's value in exposing cracks within students' learning and asking them to acknowledge their "ugly." Then even if students aren't able to be "successful" in the moment, they might return and reassess the learning later on to see what's possible (or not possible) for them.

In both of our classes (from two different disciplinary perspectives), we used BUJOs as a vehicle for critical reflection on failure. Our primary methods were (1) habit trackers, (2) "summarize-response-reflect" (SRR) writings on weekly readings, (3) weekly glows & grows, and (4) creativity (see Figure 14.1).

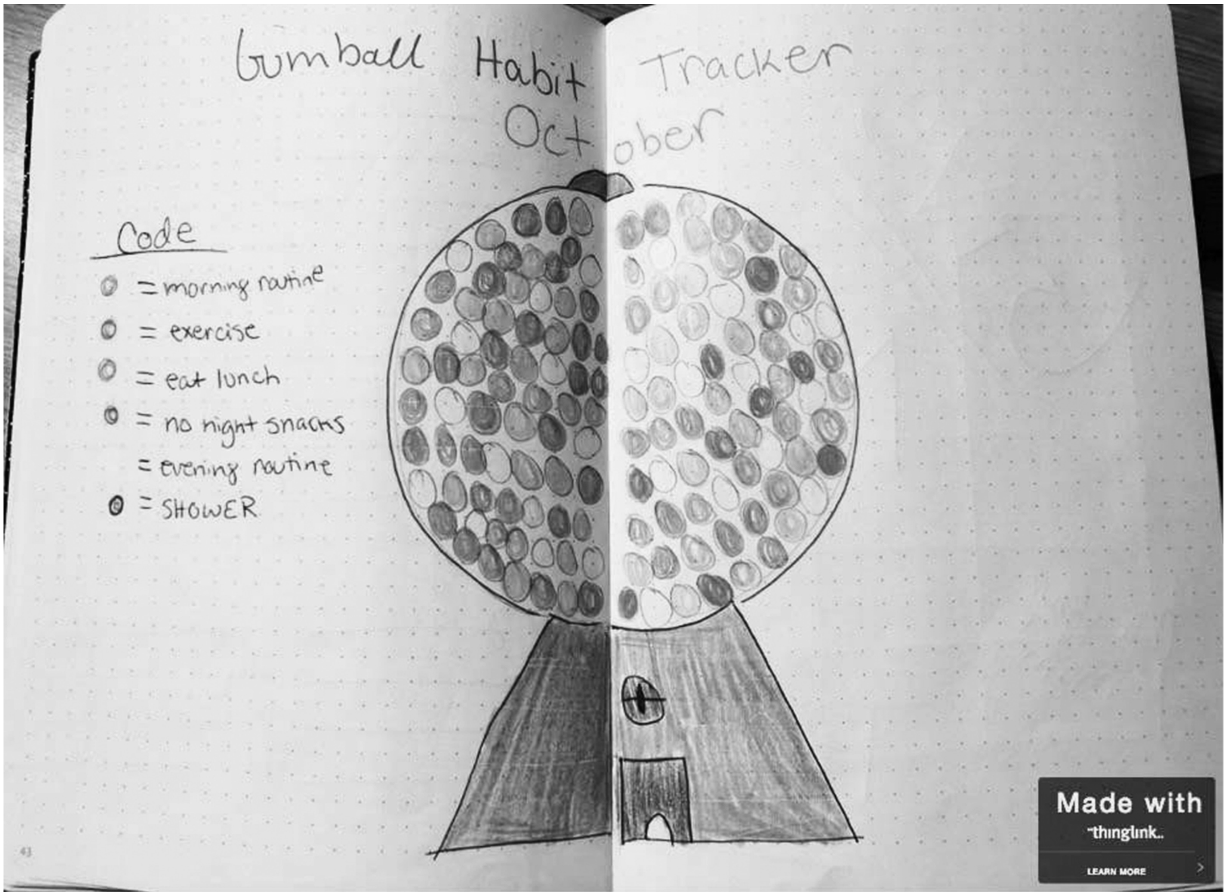

Gumball Habit Tracker
October
Code
= morning routine
= exercise
= eat lunch
= no night snacks
= evening routine
= SHOWER
Made with thinglink.
LEARN MORE

Figure 14.1: Student A: Gumball Habit Tracker. Source: Authors

←211 | 212→

The Bullet Journal

Habit Trackers. One of the key elements of a Bullet Journal is tracking a facet of one's life focusing especially on areas we hope to improve. In both classes, we used habit trackers to provide data on which students can critically reflect. As Ayobi et al. (2018) describes there are many different variations of trackers. Mood trackers, exercise trackers, habit trackers are just a few of the trackers that are common among BUJOs. Some common types of visualizations of trackers include: matrices, progress visualization, object display trackers, scatter plots, etc.

When students use trackers, they mindfully record their progress as well as setbacks. Trackers reveal information about failure through data since patterns often arise when tracking a particular habit. For example, when tracking exercise, patterns might emerge indicating that you often do not hit your exercise goal on Tuesday. Similar information can inform students' reflection moving towards the ←212 | 213→self-awareness and self-realization about whether or not active change is possible. To show what this looks like in practice, we offer three student examples:

> Student A: A gumball tracker allows this student to track daily routines, including eating right, exercising, showering, and more. While this tracker seems more general, it does in fact allow the student to visualize whether or not they are following through with what they believe to be their daily routine. And we know from working so closely with first-quarter students that something as simple as a shower or eating lunch can get lost in the hustle of classes, studying, participating in co-curriculars, and the like. For example, a quick glance reveals that this particular student did not manage to eat lunch every day.

> Student B: A mood tracker that followed the whole ten weeks of the quarter. The moods outlined include happy, annoyed, neutral, angry, content, sad, lonely, and depressed. The variety of colors used show that this particular student spent the first quarter feeling a myriad of emotions as one color does not dominate over another, allowing the student to get a sense of how the first quarter went for them on an emotional level.

> Student C: A gratitude tracker showcasing what this particular student was grateful for. The tracker reveals eleven different things ranging from the superficial (new clothes in the mail) to the emotional (her mother being her "sun") to finances (being financially stable) and more. But it also shows something else: Only eleven forms of gratitude represent an entire month.

The three examples here showcase the variety of ways that trackers can be used for students, and for our purposes with first-quarter, first-year students, they are particularly helpful in allowing students to visualize how they are transitioning into college life. Having students participate in this type of generative failure encourages a move towards independence as they become more aware of their habits (see Figures 14.2 and 14.3).

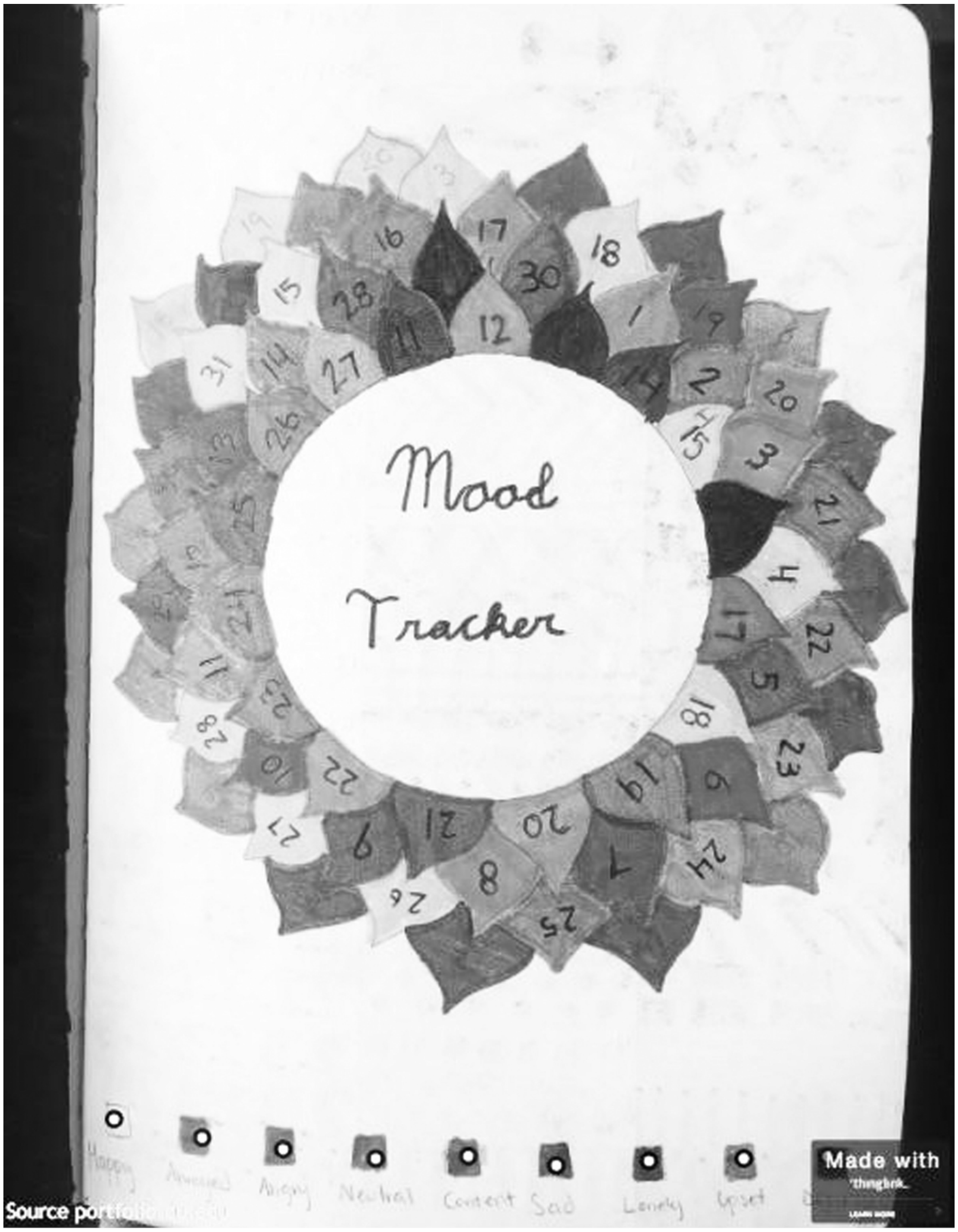

Mood
Tracker
Happy
Annoyed
Angry
Neutral
Content
Sad
Lonely
Upset
Made with
thinglink

Figure 14.2: Student B: Mood Tracker. Source: Authors

←214 | 215→

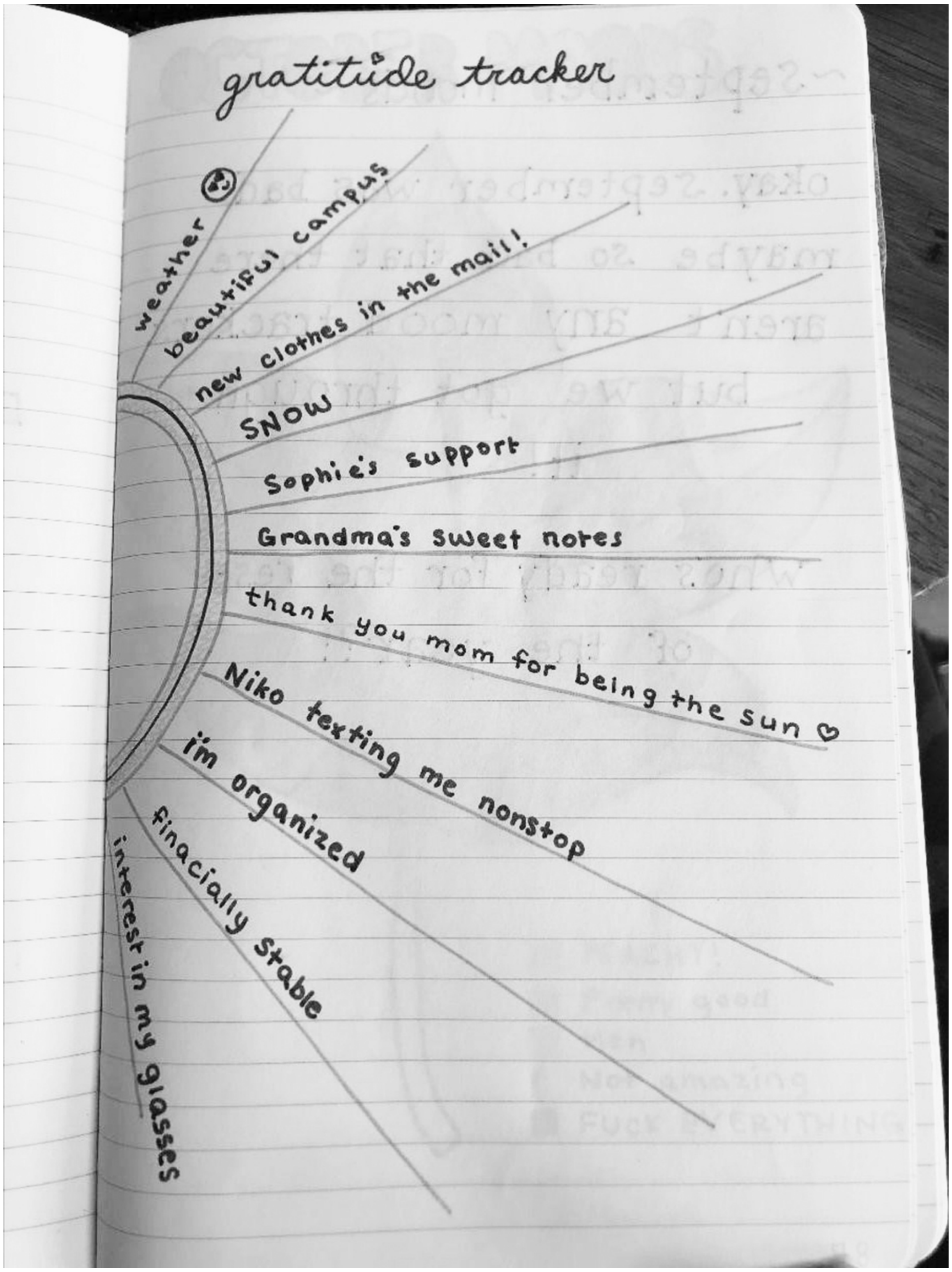

gratitude tracker
weather ☺
beautiful campus
new clothes in the mail!
SNOW
Sophie's support
Grandma's sweet notes
thank you mom for being the sun ♡
Niko texting me nonstop
i'm organized
finacially stable
interest in my glasses

Figure 14.3: Student C: Gratitude Tracker. Source: Authors

←215 | 216→

SRR: Summarize, Respond, Reflect. Deviating from the more traditional Bullet Journal, the SRR section asked students to critically read and respond to the class readings. The SRR stands for "summarizing, responding, and reflecting" over readings (an activity adapted from

Kathleen Blake Yancey). The goal of the SRRs is for students to learn how to engage with assigned material as a way to make critical connections between and among the readings.

For example, students in the Chemistry & Art FSEM were required to complete a "prior knowledge sketch" before starting their weekly reading and SRR. Students were prompted to draw a representation of a chemical phenomenon or concept that was a learning outcome for the class. The purpose of this prior knowledge sketch was to bring forward how a student visualizes a particular chemical phenomenon and exposes the gap between what a student thinks they understand and their actual understanding of a topic. These gaps represent a type of failure, because we are asking students to expose and sit with their misunderstandings. As the students completed their SRR, part of their reflection was to review their prior knowledge sketch and reexamine their original understanding. Some students were able to understand what they were missing, while others needed more support to productively move towards a conceptual understanding of the chemical phenomenon.

Previous studies have established the benefits of drawing out abstract concepts to gain conceptual understanding (Ainsworth 2011; Cooper 2017; Danipog 2011; Hilton 2011). Because students cannot see electrons or molecules, they must be able to draw representations of the behavior of these species by using different types of models. This assignment was also inspired by Veronica Burns' example of turning her Ph.D. dissertation into a visual comic book for a general audience (Burns 2014).

In the below examples, students were asked to draw a picture that represents a polymer on the molecular level. Many students thought they knew what a polymer was, but struggled to draw a visual representation in their BUJO. These drawings brought their misunderstandings to the forefront and created generative failure by allowing the students to seek information where their knowledge was lacking. Some students, even after seeking additional information, were not able to achieve a conceptual understanding of what a polymer looks like on the molecular scale (see Figures 14.4 and 14.5).

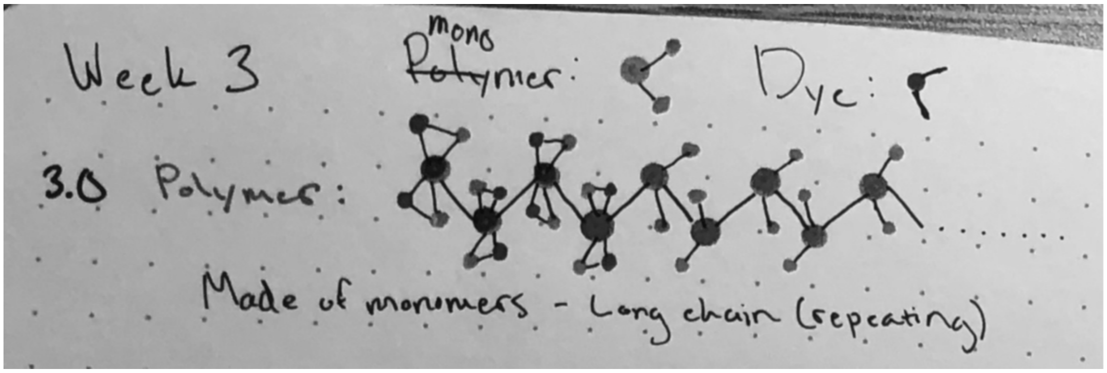

Week 3
mono
~~Poly~~mer:
Dye:
3.0 Polymer:
Made of monomers - Long chain (repeating)

Figure 14.4: Student D: A prior knowledge sketch of a polymer. Student was asked to draw a visual representation of a polymer and how a dye molecule might interact with a polymer. Source: Authors

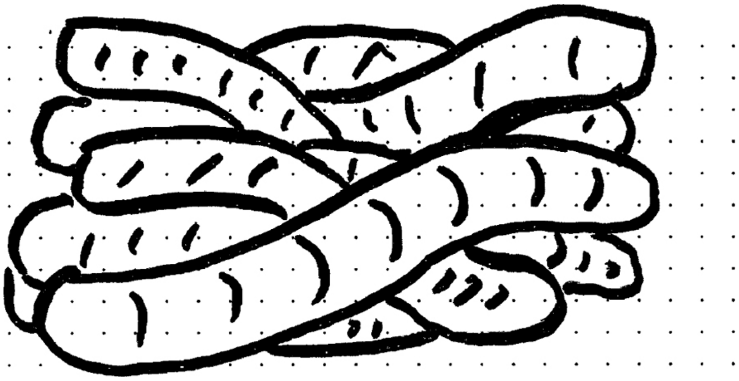


Figure 14.5: Student E: A prior knowledge sketch of a polymer. Student was asked to draw a visual representation of a polymer. Source: Authors

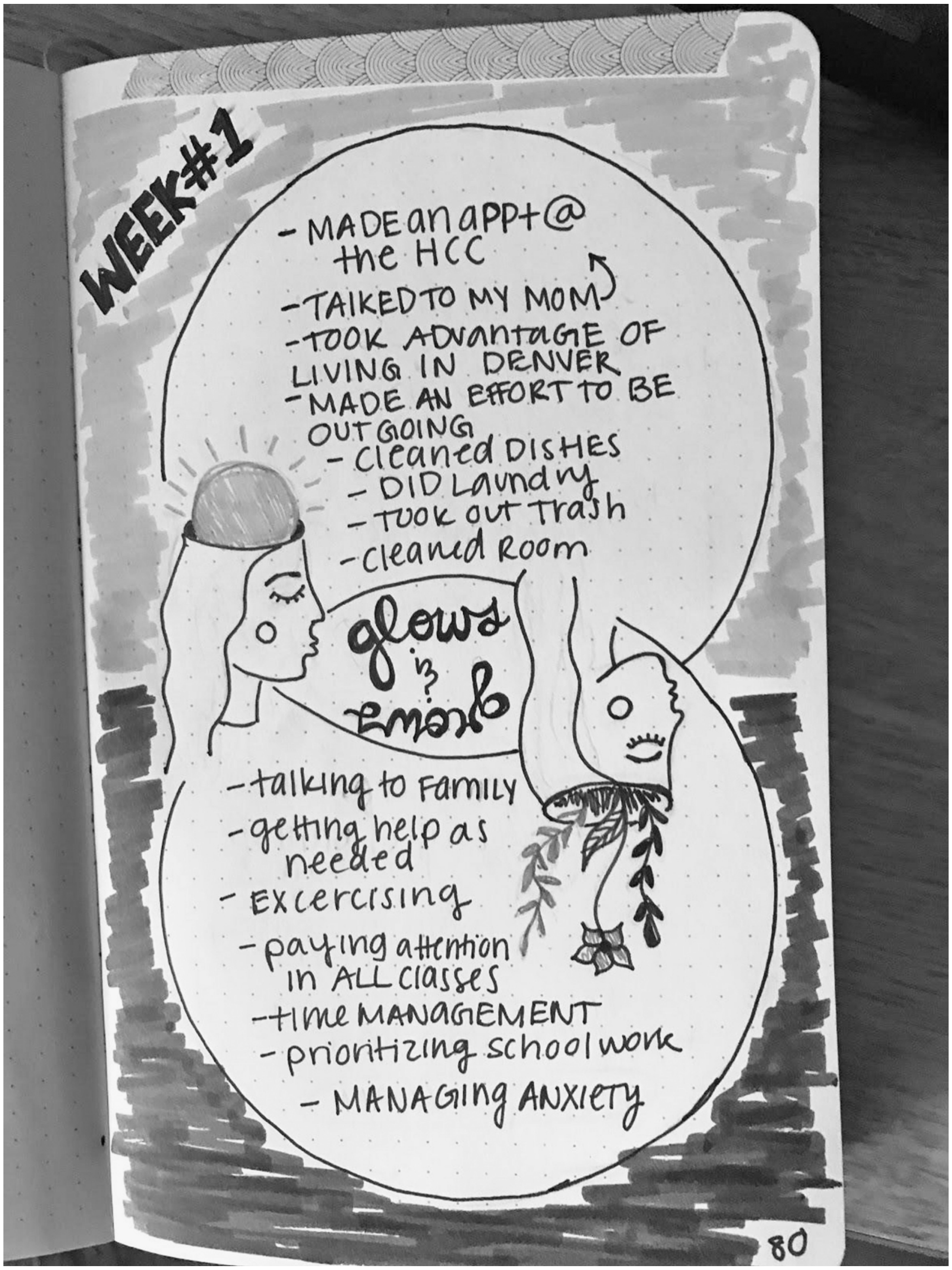
←216 | 217→

SRRs tap into students' prior knowledge and experiences with both the content of the course and the reading itself and attempt to show students what they don't know or understand as a way for them to progress forward. This type of generative failure heavily relies on backward—and inward—looking critical reflection as it asks students to mindfully examine the past to inform the current situation.

Glows & Grows. At the conclusion of each week, students were asked to reflect upon the positive aspects of the week (glows) and the challenging aspects of the week (grow). The method of glows and grows was initially introduced for professional development for teachers by K.C. Cheung

(1990). We adapted it for our courses as a necessary method of intentional reflection. Because Bullet Journals provide a record of the students’ week, students were encouraged to use their BUJO (specifically their trackers) to help guide them and make their reflection more quantitative and actionable.

The three student examples below show how powerful these intentional reflections were as the students grappled with celebrating and learning from things such ←217 | 218→as family issues, politics, relationships, eating, social events, everyday activities (like dishes), and much more. Arguably one of the most important parts of the BUJO for students, the glows and grows combined critical reflection and generative failure as a way for students to acknowledge what had happened during the week, attempt to make sense of it (by physically writing it down/out), and learn from it for the future (see Figures 14.6–14.8).



WEEK#1

- MADE an appt @ the HCC
- TAIKED TO MY MOM
- TOOK ADVantage OF LIVING IN DENVER
- MADE AN EFFORT TO BE OUTGOING
- cleaned DISHES
- DID Laundry
- TOOK out Trash
- cleaned Room

glows & grows

- talking to Family
- getting help as needed
- Excercising
- paying attention in ALL classes
- time MANAGEMENT
- prioritizing schoolwork
- MANAGING ANXIETY

80

Figure 14.6: Student F: Glows & Grows. Source: Authors

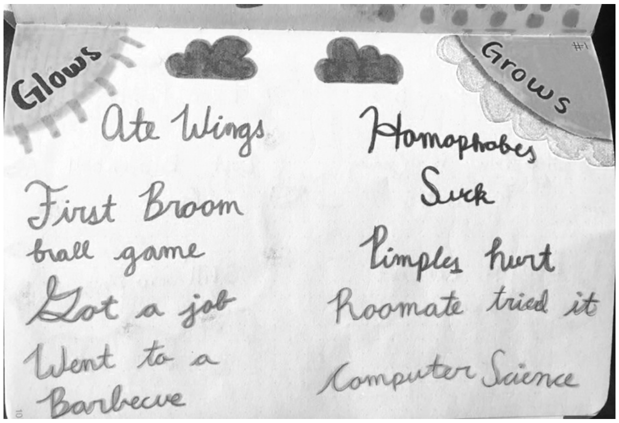
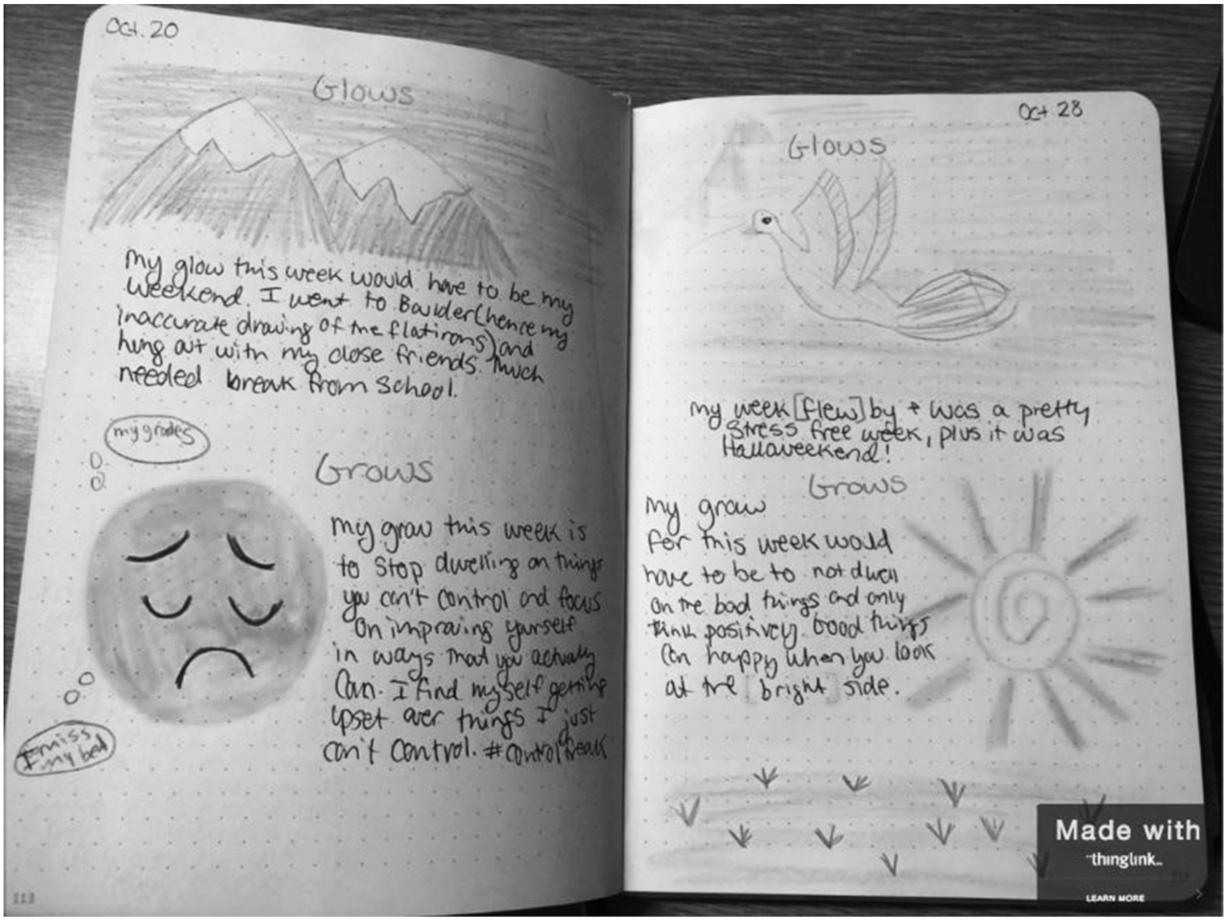

Glows
Grows
#1
Ate Wings
First Broom
ball game
Got a job
Went to a Barbecue
Homophobes Suck
Pimples hurt
Roomate tried it
Computer Science

Figure 14.7: Student B: Glows & Grows. Source: Authors


Oct. 20
Glows
my grades
Grows
I miss my bed
Oct 28
Glows
Grows
Made with
thinglink.
LEARN MORE

My glow this week would have to be my weekend. I went to Boulder (hence my inaccurate drawing of the flatirons) and hung out with my close friends. Much needed break from school.

my grow this week is to stop dwelling on things you can't control and focus on improving yourself in ways that you actually can. I find myself getting upset over things I just can't control. #controlfreak

my week [flew] by + was a pretty stress free week, plus it was Halloweekend!

My grow for this week would have to be to not dwell on the bad things and only think positively. Good things can happy when you look at the bright side.

Figure 14.8: Student A: Glows & Grows. Source: Authors

← 218 | 219 →

Creativity. A practice that is sometimes lost in college is creativity, and throughout both of our classes, students were continually asked to engage and practice with/in creativity.

Bullet Journals encourage creativity simply because of the format (a person has to create *all* aspects of the BUJO). However, we also believe in the importance of asking students to push themselves, to try things that might make ←219 | 220→them uncomfortable, and to step outside of the traditional thinking box to see what might be possible. To help promote creativity, we had students do several things: (1) to fulfill the genre conventions of a BUJO; (2) to participate in monthly doodle challenges; (3) to be honest, open-minded, and engaged with the goal and purpose of all aspects of the BUJO; and (4) to be critical, creative, and reflective in all responses. By the conclusion of the courses, we hoped the Bullet Journal would be a representation of the students' learning, their engagement with the content, the class, their BUJO, and each other.

The student examples below show the doodle challenges as well as an example of how one student took creative liberties with a SRR assignment (by drawing the SRR instead of writing it). We found that by deliberately asking students to do the things we outlined above, they were more willing to take a risk and try something outside of their comfortable routine of learning. Thus, the focus on creativity was also form of generative failure because it proved to be at odds with most of the students' prior understanding of what "learning" should be and what it should look like. Those who were able to push past this prior learning were able to expose aspects of learning that went deeper than even the assignment asked. For example, the student who did the creative SRR below went on to learn that her original major conflicted with her true interests, helping her to change majors (see Figures 14.9 and 14.10).

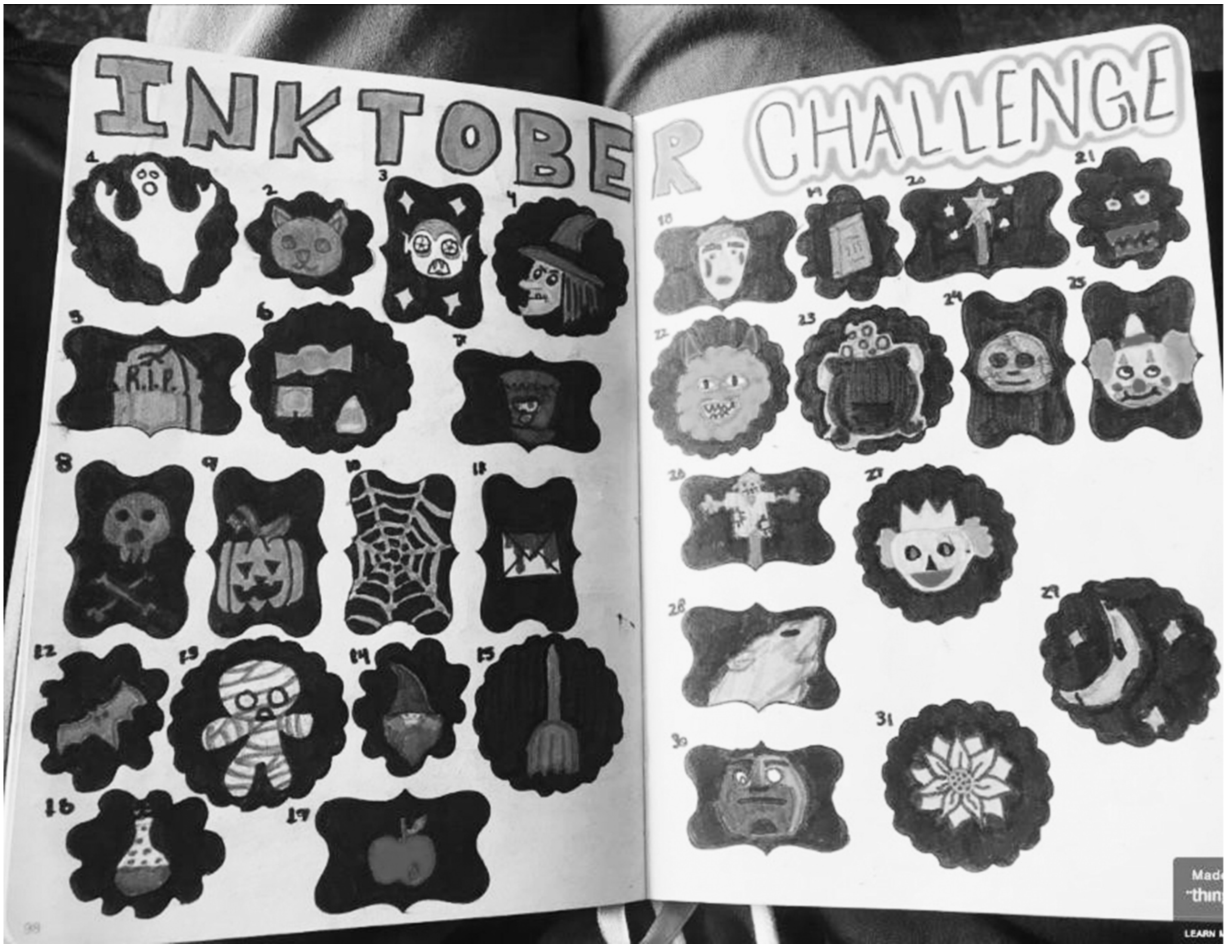

INKTOBER CHALLENGE

Figure 14.9: Student B: October Doodle Challenge. Source: Authors

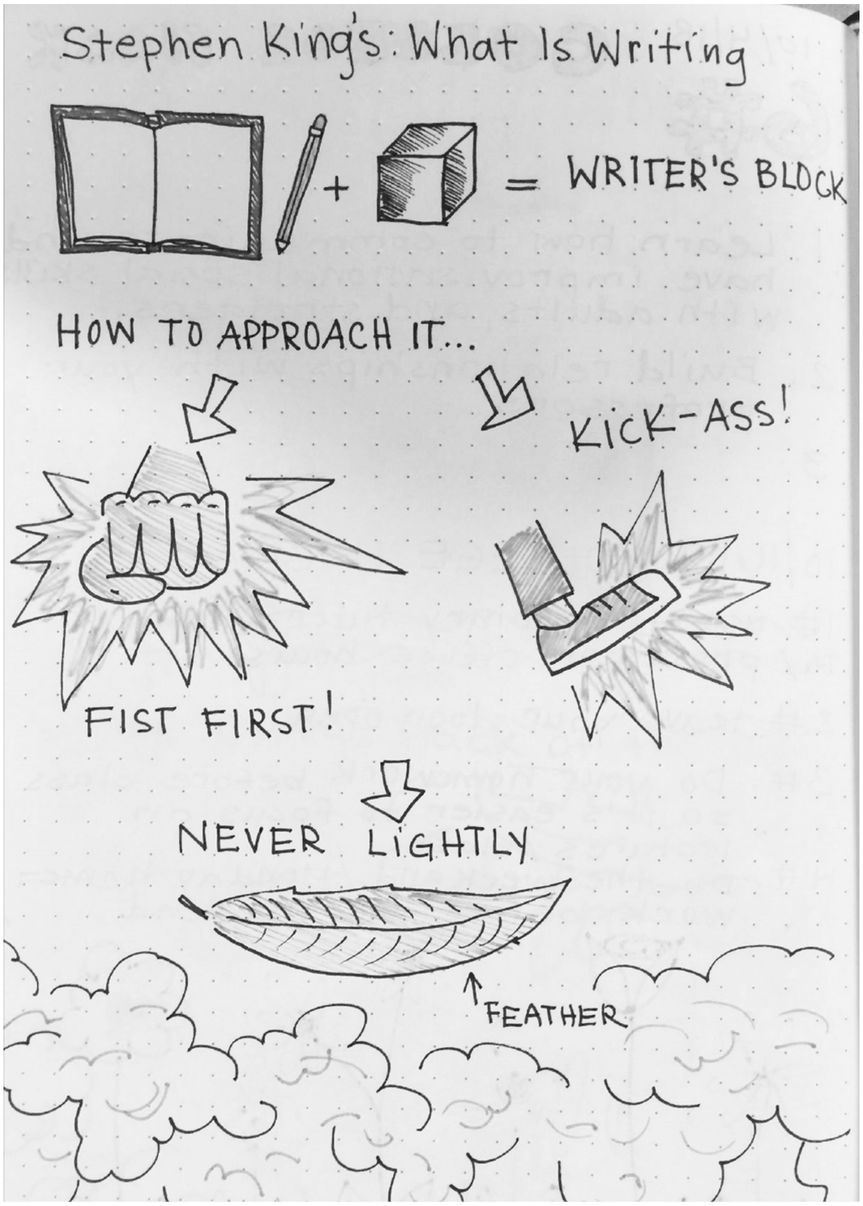

Stephen King's: What Is Writing
+
=
WRITER'S BLOCK
HOW TO APPROACH IT...
KICK-ASS!
FIST FIRST!
NEVER LIGHTLY
FEATHER

Figure 14.10: Student I: SRR over a Reading. Source: Authors

←220 | 221→

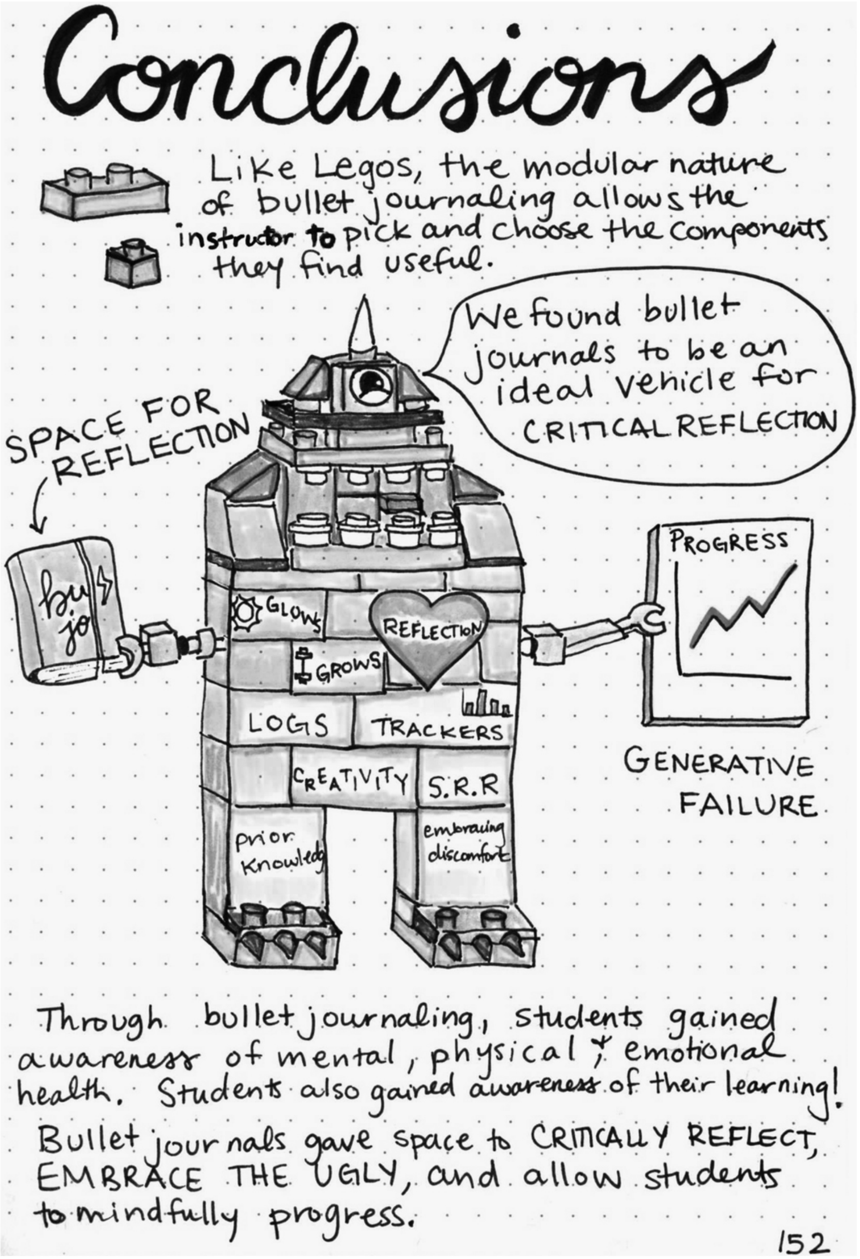
In Reflection

While we found success with this type of generative failure and critical reflection in our classrooms, we acknowledge that neither is easy to do or teach. Generative failure can offer empowering learning opportunities for students, but as we acknowledge above, some students are not ready to accept, deal with, or assess their “ugly.” They simply aren’t ready to overcome it for any number of reasons; however, teaching students to also use critical reflection helps them to acknowledge their ugly even if they aren’t ready to do something with it. And that is sometimes the first step towards moving their learning forward and outward. Additionally, we found that not all students were willing to let go of their prior conception of education to really engage with the Bullet Journal, and a few struggled to find ←221 | 222→the relevance to themselves. A handful found them to be “too much work,” too time consuming. So, we know the challenges that come with attempting this in our classrooms, but as our own opening reflections suggest, we both incorporate reflection into our daily lives, including, but not limited to our teaching practices. And we wanted to find a way to effectively merge generative failure with critical reflection in a compelling and critical way for students.

In a survey sent out almost ten weeks after the completion of the quarter, we found that out of the 24 respondents (survey was sent to all 37 students in our two classes), 15 were either still using Bullet Journals or were still using components of them. The students credit the type of Bullet Journaling we introduced as “a creative outlet”, “an effective way to organize tasks,” and “a way to stay accountable.” These three responses were echoed by other respondents and aligned with our goals for the BUJO. Overall, the students acknowledged that through the use of Bullet Journals the courses introduced them to the expectations of the college and the content of the courses and helped them develop as reflective, critical thinkers.

In sum, by the conclusion of the course, we hoped the Bullet Journals would be a great reminder for the students of the learning that happened (or didn’t happen), showing them what they accomplished (or didn’t accomplish), but more importantly, providing them with a written and visual account of what they are/were capable of doing.

←222 | 223→



Conclusions

Like Legos, the modular nature of bullet journaling allows the instructor to pick and choose the components they find useful.

We found bullet journals to be an ideal vehicle for CRITICAL REFLECTION
SPACE FOR REFLECTION
bu jo
GLOWS
REFLECTION
GROWS
LOGS
TRACKERS
CREATIVITY
S.R.R
prior knowledg
embracing discomfort
PROGRESS
GENERATIVE FAILURE

Through bullet journaling, students gained awareness of mental, physical & emotional health. Students also gained awareness of their learning!

Bullet journals gave space to CRITICALLY REFLECT, EMBRACE THE UGLY, and allow students to mindfully progress.

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←224 | 225→

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Narrativizing Dis/Ability: Deconstructing Institutional Uses of Disability Narratives

ADAM HUBRIG

Disability, as narrativized by institutions, is often framed in terms of individual failure.

Featured, for example, on Goodwill Industries International's website is one such disability narrative: a video of an Omaha, Nebraska woman and her father. The father explains the graciousness of Goodwill in providing job training to his daughter—a 51-year-old woman with a developmental disability who had failed at finding employment without the help of Goodwill (Goodwill Industries International 2019). The father's touching story is included in response to a paragraph on their website that quickly glosses over the company's use of Special Minimum Wage Certificates (Walling 2019), a provision of the great depression era Fair Labor Standards Act that allows employers to pay workers with disabilities less than the minimum wage, supposedly commensurate with these workers’ “decreased productivity” (Hrabe 2017). Although disability activists have repeatedly demanded Goodwill stop this practice, Goodwill has not relented (Adams 2013).

In another example, the multimillion-dollar self-described autism advocacy organization Autism Speaks narrativizes the founding of their institution. Co-founders Suzanne and Bob Wright were moved to start the organization when their grandson was diagnosed with autism (Autism Speaks 2019). But this narrative—as well as the rest of the institution’s “about us” profile—ignores how autistic people have responded to Autism Speaks. Autistic activists, including the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), have rallied against Autism Speaks, pointing to how the organization uses narratives about autistic people to further stigmatize and dehumanize the very people it claims to represent (ASAN 2019).

←225 | 226→

In yet another disability narrative, President Trump appeals to a public misconception that financial assistance for disability is a widely abused system fraught with fraud. As reported by the *New York Times*, a 2020 budget line item suggests the administration plans to use social media posts to “prove” instances of fraud (Pear 2019). This “welfare queen” myth is certainly typical of vilifying those on public assistance. But this narrative ignores many realities faced by disabled people, including the difficulty of qualifying for benefits (Tritch 2015). Rather than accounting for the poor quality of life for those trying to live on meager disability incomes, the institutional narrative offered by the president narrativized an imagined moral failure of individuals, presumably not disabled enough to be receiving government assistance.

In each of these disability narratives, failures of individuals are both centered and leveraged by institutions to minimize institutional culpability, even to distance and insulate these institutions from the critiques of disability rights activists. In this chapter, I unpack institutional uses of disability narratives to demonstrate how this usage interrupts the personal agency of disabled folks. Institutions, in this chapter, will be used broadly to include academic institutions, corporations, and government entities. The chapter considers, in its conclusion, how the feralization of disability narratives makes it possible to highlight systemic failures of institutions, rather than individual failures or successes of disabled people.

DISABILITY NARRATIVES AND PERSONAL AGENCY

Disability scholar Jay Dolmage traces how narrativized accounts of disabled folks in the university (sometimes based in reality but often simply made up) create attitudes and policies that impact the real lives of disabled folks (2017, 101). Dolmage explains these caricatures through three basic stories, that of Somnolent Samantha, who greedily demands more and more accommodations as she saps the resources from other students (102); Super Samantha, the disabled student who is a prodigy in all forms of digital literacy (104–106); and Slow Samantha, a holdover of defunct eugenic thinking that hinges on deficiencies (107–109). The Samantha narrative structures are used to justify institutional policies, often to the exclusion of disabled folks, by blaming them for one manufactured crisis or another. In these institutional uses of disability narratives (often done without collaboration of actual disabled people), personal accountability is maximized (the focus is these Samanthas' individual successes or failures) while institutional culpability is minimized.

As Dolmage's account of the "Samantha" figures underscores, the construction and deployment of disability narratives by institutions is frequently done without the input or consent of disabled folks. Moreover, institutional uses of disability narratives center questions of dis/ability on individual disabled people while ignoring ←226 | 227→systemic failures of institutions. This often further stigmatizes and excludes people while creating a facade of neutrality. The narrativized failures (and for that matter successes) of disabled people are leveraged as justification for institutional ableism.

Who owns the narratives of disabled folks? I can't answer emphatically enough that I believe people own their own narratives and should have agency in their use. Questions concerning who owns lived narratives have been taken up by other disability studies scholars and advocates. Disabilities rights advocate Imani Barbarin writes about the phenomena of allies of disabled folks talking for (and in some cases, talking over) disabled folks. She contends, "What little space we had was overpowered by ableist narratives and the relatives and caretakers of disabled people. I hate to have to tell you (no I don't), but the authorities on disabled people are disabled people" (Barbarin 2018). Like Barbarin, I insist on the importance of disabled folks having agency over their own narratives.

Yet, as Barbarin observes, that is infrequently the case. Late disabilities advocate and comedian Stella Young is credited with coining the phrase "inspiration porn" (2014), a phrase connoting not necessarily the sexual exploitation of disabled folks (which is certainly a related problem), but rather narratives and images of disabled people that are used to benefit other (presumed abled) people. For Young, the word porn is useful because these abled deployments of disability narratives "objectif[y]; one group of people for another group of people" (2014). While Young is primarily concerned with the immediate mental and emotional impact of inspiration porn, my concern is who uses narratives and what effect usage has on the very concept of disability.

In her effort to better understand conceptions of disability through analytical philosophy, Elizabeth Barnes points to disability narrative tropes that flow from a (mis)understanding of disability. I quote her at length because of the importance of her observation:

> The dominant conception of disability in contemporary society is an explicitly normative one. Disability is tragedy. Disability is loss. Disability is misfortune. Within this normative conception of disability, there is little room for understanding the experience of the thriving disabled person. And so we develop narratives for disability to accommodate the fact that many disabled people seem to thrive. We tell the story of the tragic overcomer—the plucky little cripple who beat the odds despite the personal tragedy of disability. We tell the story of

> the inspirational disabled person—the courageous cripple who persevered through so many hardships, and whose bravery we admire because of it. We tell the story of the saintly disabled person—the smiling cripple who endured so much with such beatific patience. This is how we understand the thriving disabled person. They are thriving *in spite of disability*. They are never simply thriving. (Barnes 2018, 168)

Through Barnes' account of disability narratives, the inclination to narrativize the individual success of a disabled person and so reify existing logics is evident. As a "plucky, courageous, smiling" cripple, I argue that it matters a great deal who ←227 | 228→the *we* telling these stories happens to be. As a disabled person pursuing a PhD, I often hear abled colleagues remark, "If someone like you can do grad school, then there's hope for me!" or that I'm so inspiring or some other such thing which, at the root of it, always boils down to *I'm thankful I'm not you*. While I don't think there is necessarily any ill will harbored by my colleagues applying these narratives to me—in fact, I happen to be very fond of these people—I am concerned about what these narratives *do*. I am primarily concerned with the harm disabled folks incur as a result of success/failure narratives, particularly when their use is informed by (and informs) institutional logics.

While Dolmage, Barbarin, and Barnes point to how mobilization of disability narratives can be harmful to disabled people, I pause to point out that these narratives are not always used negatively, that in them can be hope and healing and joy for others. These narratives certainly have the potential to encourage other disabled humans. As disability studies scholar Stephanie Kerschbaum has noted, "the context in which queries about my disability are made as well as my own relationship to the questioner influence how I react as well as the degree to which the questions feel substantively connected to my work" (Kerschbaum 2013, 56). That is to say, questions or concerns about disability are not always (or not even usually) connected to hostility.

Moving from the personal to the structural, what is at stake in institutional deployment of disability narratives? For disabled folks, the contours of our day to day lives are often shaped by these narrative tropes of failure: We are told to graciously accept less—even exclusion—from institutional systems that deem themselves neutral (like Goodwill's reduced pay); we are ignored by self-appointed "advocates" (like Austism Speaks) who speak for and over us; we are told that accommodations ranging from ramps to video captions are inconvenient for institutions, so we should be patient—and institutions spin disability narratives to justify these logics. Institutional narratives contribute to other people's implicit understanding of what ability and disability are, shaping their definitions as well as the constructs of disability through which our peers "read" us disabled folk.

INSTITUTIONAL USE OF DISABILITY NARRATIVES AND LIVES OF DISABLED FOLKS

Institutional deployment of disability narratives has ramifications in the lives of disabled folks: Consider the inspiration porn subgenre of the supercrip narrative, which focuses entirely on extraordinary and successful disabled people. While you may not know the term, you are certainly familiar with the genre, like the story of University of Arkansas student Patience Beard, who made national news for her work as an Arkansas Razorback cheerleader who happens to have a prosthetic ←228 | 229→leg (Davidson 2012). The director of the cheerleading program insisted that she would not give Beard any kind of special treatment, to which the cheerleading coach insists proudly, "We expect the same from her that we expect of everyone else. No more, no less" (Davidson 2012). A former cheerleader remarks, "Stunting is hard for people with two legs. She makes it look effortless" (Davidson 2012). The University of Arkansas reports—in what seems a tidy summation of the supercrip metanarrative—that "her story is about turning what many might consider a setback into something positive" (University of Arkansas 2013). While Beard should be proud of her own accomplishments and is free to celebrate them as she chooses, I am concerned with the institutional narrativizing of Beard's success.

Supercrip narratives make (often impossible) demands on the lives and wellbeing of disabled folks while downplaying institutional ableism. Disability rights advocate Claire Stanley recalls her formal education: “In high school, I often felt pressure to be the supercrip. Because I was the only blind student in my honors classes, I felt like I had to work super hard to prove that blind students could do well in school too. But let me tell you. It’s exhausting. Why should I have to be superhuman? Why must I prove that beyond my disability I am some superhero” (Stanley 2015). Stanley’s account reveals what is hidden in supercrip narratives—a socially constructed, supposedly neutral *normate* position, a set of ableist assumptions about bodies and minds. Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson observe, “Normal always highlights particular power relations that affect everyone, but especially people with visible disabilities.… [T];he term normate has been developed in the field of disability studies to connote the ways normalcy is used to control bodies—normalcy, as a social construct, acts upon people with disabilities” (Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson 2010, 24). Returning to the comments of Beard’s cheerleading director, we see an appeal to uphold ableism, an appeal to seemingly neutral rules that disregard the fact that a “setback” becoming “positive” is based on a set of ableist body assumptions to begin with. The institution can conveniently deploy narratives like Beard’s in place of actually reviewing inequitable policies and continue to expect disabled folks to overcome “setbacks” like prosthetic legs.

But failure narratives about disabled people can be used to justify institutional logics in another manner. Disabled failure narratives are used, for example, as a basis to exclude disabled people through national and global policy. Consider how President Trump chose to frame a disabled failure narrative during his now infamous meeting with Democratic leaders Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer. During this meeting, in which Trump said he would “own” the 2019 government shutdown, he demonized disability as justification for his proposed border wall, claiming that “People with tremendous medical trouble and difficulty are pouring into our country and in many cases it is contagious” (Milbank 2018). Before untangling this narrative, I want to make clear that "people with medical difficulty" is not synonymous with "people with disabilities." There are certainly a great many "healthy" disabled ←229 | 230→people who would not qualify as having medical trouble—though certain ableist lenses might make it difficult to understand their own conditions as healthy (Wendell 1997, 19). Nevertheless, Trump's comments are indicative of an abled purview, one that not only maligns those seeking to immigrate or seek asylum in the United States, but also serves set expectations about whose country this is. "Our" country, in these comments, is put in opposition to "people with tremendous medical trouble and difficulty." "Contagious" further serves to exclude people facing medical trouble, vilifying them. Per Trump's failure narrative, requiring medical attention is enough to justify being banned from entering "our" country.

In the example of Beard's supercrip narrative and Trump's remarks as justification for exclusion, my concern with how disability narratives are leveraged by institutions stems partly from how these narratives shape disabled folks' experiences within those same institutions. They require a "fantasy of an active, autonomous, and self-activating individualism" (Halberstam 2011, 130) while minimizing the legal and ethical responsibility of institutions to meet basic accessibility standards. To illustrate this point, I return to Goodwill's narrativizing of disabled employees who, with Goodwill's training, can "contribute"—as if disabled folks do not contribute to our collective culture and understanding of the world already. Goodwill's narrative ignores the socio-economic conditions that create barriers preventing many people with disabilities from finding employment in the first place.

Refusing to accept narratives of disability as failure—failure to contribute, to live a full life, to compensate for lack—disability rights activists promote concepts like "mere difference" that signify an intervention in understandings of disability. According to Barnes, "As disabled people, we are told that there is something about our bodies that is lacking, that is *less than*. Disability pride says it doesn't have to be that way" (2018, 186). For Barnes there can be both an understanding of personal difficulties of having disabilities (like chronic pain, for instance) and an understanding that there is nothing inherently negative about having a different body (Barnes’ work deals exclusively with physical disabilities, though her reasoning seems applicable to other forms of disability as well). *Mere difference* does not signal worse or inferior; it highlights the fact that much of the difficulty of being disabled results from social constructions of disability.

Institutional uses of disability narratives—as seen in Dolmage’s Samanthas, Beard’s supercrip narrative, and Trump’s contagion logic—often lead to the construction and/or reification of institutional barriers for disabled folks, barriers masked as natural or neutral rather than manifestations of ableist ideology. Consider how, in yet another instance of institutionally deployed narratives about disabled people, Margaret Price describes a common occurrence when scholars take up the differences in how education might be experienced by those with mental disabilities. Price notes that “such works often treat mentally disabled subjects (almost always students) as ‘Other,’ that is, as special cases who should be written ←230 | 231→about—even diagnosed—by teacher-scholars writing from a ‘normal’ perspective” (2014, 52). Deficit-fixated narratives reaffirm a negative sense of disability, moving us further away from an understanding of mere difference. Importantly, these narratives erect institutional barriers that create, in this case, spaces devoid of “scholars who cannot access this privileged world because they fail to make sense in the approved ways” (Price 2014, 57). Institutional constructions of disability narratives in terms of success and failure also serve to insulate institutions from criticism and change.

INSTITUTIONAL DIS/ABILITY NARRATIVES AS SHIELD

What are the incentives for institutions to narrativize disability? Consider how accommodations language is leveraged and used by institutions to paint certain students as failures, such as how the language of seeking “accommodations” suggests that certain people (often labeled “disabled”) within institutions fail to meet institutional expectations but that some kind of allowance will be made, ignoring that the assumed neutral standard is ableist to begin with (Dolmage 2017, 81). As Price points out, students seeking accommodations are often narrativized as “problems” (2014, 59), as failures within an assumed-to-be-neutral system.

Within institutions, Dolmage reminds us, the language of accommodations is often considered an act of institutional charity: “Students are encouraged to perform the role of gracious, thankful subject, to praise good professors and administrators and never complain. […] The student is expected to be fully thankful and happy, regardless of the fit of the accommodation or its efficacy” (2017, 81). Accommodations as charity is an institutional narrative that insulates the institution from criticism.

Contemporary discourses of charity have been shaped by the formation of modern American capitalism in the nineteenth century, which saw a transition from communal care for people with differing capacities to a system where this care was provided by private institutions (Snyder and Mitchell 2015, 56). Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s historical account of the social production of disability and the response to this disability as institutional charity is important, in part, because it highlights institutional deployment of disability narratives that name disabled folks “as members of a deficient population—the legion of defective, delinquent, nonproductive, and burdensome” (Snyder and Mitchell 2015, 39). Each of these labels are intrinsically tied to particular ableist notions of labor and ability.

And as these scholars point out, acts of narratively constructed charity are meant to create docile, disabled subjects who are grateful for charity (Dolmage 2017, 81; Snyder and Mitchell 2015, 56). Institutionally adopted narratives—of ←231 | 232→the smiling cripple, for instance—seek to corral emotions of outrage at ableist injustice, presenting institutions as neutral and blameless when it comes to the wellbeing of disabled folk.

But labor conditions required by institutions are not neutral, and these demands often harm bodyminds. A recent study suggests graduate students are six times more likely to experience anxiety and depression than the average person (Flaherty 2018). Conditions of employment cannot be divorced from their effects on bodies and minds. Dolmage emphasizes this point when he notes that universities exploit disabled people's labor: "Disabled people with PhDs are much more likely to end up underemployed, exploited as adjunct labor, and to experience discrimination as a result of their disability" (2017, 178). Academic institutions both *cause* disability and *exploit* the labor of disabled folks.

While Snyder and Mitchell examine the root of this exploitation in capitalism, Jasbir Puar examines how the exploitation of disability is also a colonial project. Her intersectional approach to disability studies recognizes that "the production of most of the world's disability happens through colonial violence, developmentalism, war, occupation, and the disparity of resources—indeed, through U.S. settler colonial and imperial occupations, as a sign of the global reach of empire" (Puar 2017). Colonial narratives of disability—like President Trump's comments about people requiring medical attention and seeking medical resources of the United States—outright ignores American involvement in destabilizing governments, economies, and ecologies around the globe.

A similar hypocrisy occurs on smaller institutional scales as well. Consider Nike's use of disabled athletes as a marketing strategy. In recent years, they have featured a number of athletes with disabilities to advertise their brand, but their "Unlimited Will" advertisement campaign is textbook inspiration porn. The "Unlimited Will" commercial, according to Nike, "celebrates an extraordinary athlete, Kyle Maynard, and his determination to surmount any challenge in his path" (Nike 2016). While it is not inherently wrong to celebrate the achievements of disabled people (the commercial is part of the campaign celebrating Maynard's climbing of Mount Kilimanjaro as a quadriplegic), Nike is able to insulate itself from how it might cause disability, glossing over the material conditions in which their products are made. "Unlimited Will" distances Nike from its long, complicated involvement with sweatshops (Harrison and Scorse 2004). The extent to which Nike sweatshops may present physical hazards cannot be fully understood as Nike does not allow external reviews of its facilities (Segran 2017).

All of this is not to beat up on Nike, a company that also sponsors the Paralympics and has produced shoes designed to assist people with disabilities (Domanico 2015), nor to detract from the accomplishments of disabled athletes—acknowledgments that demonstrate how these initiatives corral contradictory emotions. Nike's deployment of disability narratives illustrates how institutional use of disability ←232 | 233→narratives can make institutions appear neutral or even advocates for people with disabilities. All the while, institutions can distance themselves from practices and policies that contribute to or cause disability. But how might institutions better he held accountable?

FERALIZING DIS/ABILITY NARRATIVES, DISRUPTING INSTITUTIONAL ABLEISM

In the final chapter of *Cultural Locations of Disability,* Snyder and Mitchell consider the possible repercussions of locating disability studies within academic institutions, warning that there is a risk that academic disability study located there might reproduce the same oppression, the same institutionally sanctioned narratives about disability that disability rights advocates have labored so hard to resist. Snyder and Mitchell title their final chapter "Compulsory Feralization," denoting, in part, the importance of refusing to let institutions own disabled narratives, which continue to pathologize human beings and exclude them while drawing on those narratives to suit institutional logics: "Disability finds itself in a peculiar situation in the academy, where it is allied with a form of subaltern knowledge that is both disparaged and sought after at the same time" (Snyder and Mitchell 2015, 188). Disability narratives seeking to resist becoming objects of institutional power must be feral, that is, resist domestication by institutional logics, particularly because the field of disability studies is frequently relegated to an elitist, white-dominated academic enterprise that regularly precludes disabled folks in more liminal positions (Piepzna-Samarashinha 2018, 37).

Narratives about disability that are framed primarily in terms of success or failure are too often narratives about the usefulness of bodyminds to institutions, narratives which serve larger bootstraps metanarratives that so conveniently ignore entrenched power structures that put certain bodies in the margins to begin with. Instead, disability rights advocates might deploy feral narratives, narratives that institutions would be wary to reach out and touch because they bite back. Feral disability narratives might, as disability rights activists continue to do, narrativize and map the systematic failures of institutions to highlight institutional culpability.

To confront the institutional narratives of grateful smiling cripples graciously receiving accommodations, disability activists often deploy feral narratives of institutional failure, narratives which underscore the systematic failures of institutions. For instance, in a large corridor at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication, a cardboard sign proudly exclaimed, “The CCCC Convention is Accessible.” But an anonymous collective of disabled scholars and allies feralized that exclamation, posting sticky notes on the sign that captured a range of ways in which disabled people experienced a lack of access—highlighting the ←233 | 234→need for paper copies of presentations, asking all speakers to use the provided microphones, calling for consistent use of image descriptions in presentations, and noting access issues with the convention’s smartphone app (see Figure 15.1). Each sticky note called out institutional failure and disrupted the official claim by the host organization.

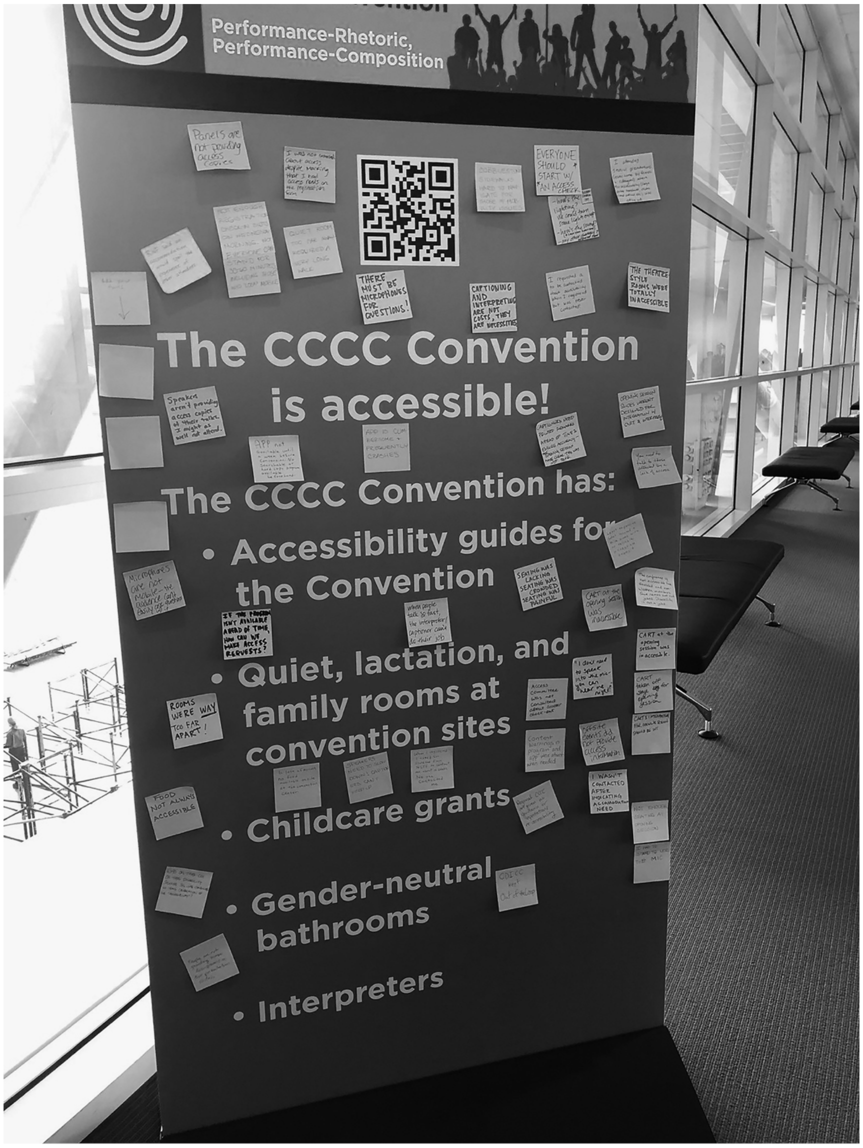
Performance-Rhetoric,
Performance-Composition
Panels are not providing access copies
EVERYONE SHOULD START W/ AN ACCESS CHECK
QUIET ROOM TOO FAR AWAY REQUIRED A VERY LONG WALK
THERE MUST BE MICROPHONES FOR QUESTIONS!
CAPTIONING AND INTERPRETING ARE NOT COSTS, THEY ARE NECESSITIES
THE THEATRE STYLE ROOMS WERE TOTALLY INACCESSIBLE
The CCCC Convention
is accessible!
Speakers aren't providing access copies of their talks. I might as well not attend.
APP IS CUMBERSOME + FREQUENTLY CRASHES
The CCCC Convention has:
• Accessibility guides for the Convention
Microphones are not mobile—the audience can't easily ask questions
SEATING WAS LACKING SEATING WAS CROWDED SEATING WAS PAINFUL
IF THE PROGRAM ISN'T AVAILABLE AHEAD OF TIME, HOW CAN WE MAKE ACCESS REQUESTS?
When people talk so fast, the interpreter/captioner can't do their job
CART at the opening session was inaccessible
• Quiet, lactation, and family rooms at convention sites
ROOMS WERE WAY TOO FAR APART!
Offsite events did not provide access information
I WASN'T CONTACTED AFTER INDICATING ACCOMODATION NEED
FOOD NOT ALWAYS ACCESSIBLE
• Childcare grants
• Gender-neutral bathrooms
• Interpreters

Figure 15.1: The CCCC Convention is Accessible. Source: Vyshali Manivannan, "Collective Action for Conference Accessibility." Printed with permission. Copyright 2019

Like the sticky note accessibility litany, challenging institutional disability narratives requires comprehensive maps of disability (Dolmage 2017, 42) representing a diverse array of disabled experiences. We must hold institutions responsible not just for listening to disabled perspectives, but for actively seeking them out ←234 | 235→when it comes to shaping and making policy. Consider that, as I write at the beginning of 2019, the inhumane use of electric shock devices on disabled people—devices similar to shock collars used on animals—is still legal in the United States and routinely used on people with developmental disabilities at Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, Massachusetts (Burkholder 2014). The disability rights advocacy organization Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) has rallied, testified, and finally convinced the FDA to consider a ban on these shock devices. In response to these efforts, ADAPT cautiously replied in a news release: “Finally, as a community, we must recognize the power of protest and the important role that direct action plays in our advocacy. It seems unlikely that the FDA would have moved forward without activists—willing to put their bodies on the line—demanding action” (ADAPT 2018). Central to this activism was the testimony, the narratives, of disabled folks who shared their experiences as victims of shock therapy, which counters institutional accounts that seek to legitimize this dehumanizing shock program (Burkholder 2014). These narrativizations are necessarily feral, and they map disabled experiences in such a way that they cannot so easily be redeployed for the advancement of institutional ideologies.

While work like that taken on by ADAPT is (and must be) feral, it is important to highlight that it cannot be feral without being intersectional. This kind of advocacy is Universal Design in its truest sense. I have no doubt that you have noticed similar uses of institutional narratives deployed around issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and many other intersections of difference. To create a map of feral narratives that truly makes clear the failures of institutions and resulting ongoing oppression, we need intersectional narratives that foreground the true range of human experiences. As Reina Sultan points out, by listening to the narratives of disabled women of color, “we learn about the experiences unique to Black disabled women. Amplifying their voices encourages more diverse, inclusive and representative discourse from which everyone benefits” (Sultan 2018). True Universal Design is not an end goal, but a verb (Dolmage 2017, 115), an ongoing process. It is a realization that we need to continue to revise societal understandings and expectations in light of differing experiences, to have active, ongoing dialogues which seek narratives that reshape and reconfigure institutional logics and policies to benefit everyone. This feralization of narratives must include perspectives as diverse as disabled experiences are diverse. We need advocates like Barbarin who work to understand the intersections of disability and race; projects like “Rest for Resistance” that centers the mental health experiences of queer and trans people of color; and chronicsex.org that seeks to better map the intersections of disability and sexuality. Anything less would reconstitute oppressive institutional policies and logics in another form.

And for the sake of myself, my students, and other disabled folks, I need a diverse range of feral narratives that remove the stigma from disability. I need ←235 | 236→narratives that literally free other disabled folks from electric shock devices, and ones that seek to hold institutions accountable for their oppressive, ableist behavior. I advocate for feralized disability narratives that forego “self-activating individualism,” and instead point to the failures that matter, the structural sort that socially construct disability, that cause my students to be wary of accommodations and afraid to share their own narratives. I refuse to be satisfied with “accommodations”—for my disabilities or my students’ disabilities—because doing so elides institutional failure. Instead, I charge institutions to reckon with these failures to imagine bodies and minds that don’t correlate to their fictional normate, to understand that “abled” is not a neutral position, and to own their failures and do better. We must refuse to accept anything less.

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←236 | 237→

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INTERCHAPTER THREE

Papelitos Guardados, Part I: On Collegiality and Failure[1]

AJA Y. MARTINEZ

Critical race theorist Richard Delgado characterizes counterstory as “a kind of counter-reality” created/experienced by “outgroups” subordinate to those atop the racial and gendered hierarchy. While those in power, or as Delgado offers, the “ingroup,” craft stock stories to establish a shared sense of identity, reality, and naturalization of their superior position, the “outgroup aims to subvert that ingroup reality” (Delgado 1989, 2412–2413). Delgado describes stock stories as those which people in positions of dominance collectively form and tell about themselves. These stories choose among available facts to present a picture of the world that best fits and supports their positions of relative power (Delgado 1989, 2421). Stock stories feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality. Powerful because they are often repeated until canonized or normalized, stock stories, and those who tell them, insist that their version of events is indeed reality, and any stories that counter these stock tellings are deemed biased, self-interested, and ultimately not credible.

Counterstory, then, is a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told. Counterstory as methodology serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. As Victor Villanueva has been ←239 | 240→saying for twenty years, "people of color writing frankly, sympathetically about matters concerning racism … will attract people of color in sufficient numbers to begin to affect racism" (1999, 652). This form of scholarship is not without risks/consequences, as Marcos J. Del Hierro (2019) has so aptly described in his op-ed "A Room of One's Own White Colleagues." However, in a gesture of coalition and solidarity with Del Hierro and others of my generation who have the audacity to speak (Drake 2019, n.p.), I offer this essay as my contribution toward our collective efforts of what Yanira Rodríguez terms rhetorical "decolonial refusal" (Rodríguez 2020, 2). We no longer accept and protect white fragility and toxic masculinity in the academy, in society, in our lives (Cabrera 2016). *Ya. Basta*. We're done.

The Latina Feminist Group, a collective of Latina feminists in higher education, gather and "weave *testimonios*, stories of [their] lives, to reveal [their] own complex identities as Latinas" (2001, 1). As a collective they resist "systemic violence and cultural ideologies that continually repositioned [them] at the margins," and this transformational resistance of theirs is pursued through theorizing experience and relying on a methodology that allows them to narrate lived realities that are otherwise silenced or censured (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001, 2, 12). In this pursuit, The Latina Feminist Group created its collection, *Telling to Live*, as a space to resist, but also as a space in which to perform painful and vulnerable disclosure safely. Previous to the creation of *Telling to Live,* and throughout the process of constructing their collection, many of the Latinas involved voiced the fears they felt concerning public storytelling, and in particular Gloria Cuádrez states, " 'I've been waiting for ten years to feel comfortable enough to say this publicly. I may never say it again, so I am grateful we have created this opportunity' " (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 14). *Papelitos guardados* are named by this collective as the writings "tucked away, hidden from inquiring eyes" (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 1) that Cuádrez and other contributors pull from to create *testimonios* toward social justice. The Latina Feminist Group adopt the expression "*papelitos guardados*" because it

> evokes the process by which we contemplate thoughts and feelings, often in isolation and through difficult times. We keep them in our memory, write them down, and store them in safe places waiting for the appropriate moment when we can return to them for review and analysis, or speak out and share them with others. Sharing can begin a process of empowerment. (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 1)

However, if sharing stories of oppression and marginalization "begins a process of empowerment," why do members of The Latina Feminist Group express fear in disclosure? Many of the women in the collective share stories with one another that they've never shared with anyone before, yet some still opt to publish *testimonios* anonymously due to fear and vulnerability related to "professional or political consequences for personal disclosures" (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 20). Personally, I have been called "crazy" for telling my stories (an ableist trope routinely used to gaslight people experiencing racism). Even those who purport to support ←240 | 241→me have advised that I wait until I am no longer in a vulnerable position within the academic power hierarchy. But isn't my position exactly what makes my words necessary (Anzaldúa 1999, 265)? Isn't it people with less power who create *testimonios*? Is there no better moment than now for me to do exactly the kind of telling I include in this essay (Harris and González 2012, 3)?

What follows in this essay is a specific method of counterstory that I have termed stock story versus counterstory (Martinez 2014, 39). As Delgado (1989) and I (2014) have asserted, placing two dialogues side-by-side enables counterstorytellers to develop ideas through exchanges between characters that both represent and voice contending viewpoints about contemporary social issues. The audience is invited to first experience a version of the events from a status quo point of view, and second from a minoritized viewpoint. In the case of this essay's stock story, the status quo represents the figure of the "colorblind" white supremacist, as well as enactment of white mediocrity/fragility as institutional practice (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Mitchell 2018). Following the stock story, a counterstory develops a minoritized viewpoint to critique the viewpoint put forth by the stock story while offering alternative possibilities for the audience to consider.

Like other counterstorytellers have done before me (Bell 1987; Delgado 1995; Martinez 2014; Williams 1992; Yosso 2006), I compose my counterstory characters as composites. Composite characters are written into "social, historical, and political situations that allow the dialogue to speak to the research findings and creatively challenge racism and other forms of subordination" (Yosso 2006, 11). Because these characters are written as composites of many individuals, they do not have a one-to-one correspondence to any one individual I know (Delgado 1995, xix). In many cases, and as is the case for this particular stock story versus counterstory, the composite characters are abstractions informed by statistical data, the literature and my lived experience. The research is accounted for in the bibliography (for works directly cited) as well as in a citation section titled "Textual Influences on Dialogues" (for works consulted that inform the topics discussed, the settings, and the characters). As informed by this rigorously researched and lived data set, the composites represent cultural or political ideologies, and could be mistakenly (or irresponsibly) read as overly stereotyped depictions of certain ideologies and politics. The composite characters and settings below represent more than just a single individual and are intentionally crafted as representative of multiple viewpoints, positionalities, and ideologies.

A STOCK STORY DISCUSSING ACCUSATIONS MADE ABOUT A CHICANA JUNIOR PROFESSOR’S COLLEGIALITY

In the particular academic institution providing the setting for this story, a meeting has been called by the Dean of Humanities to investigate a formal complaint ←241 | 242→of un-collegiality made against a junior, tenure-track professor. Typically, when claims of this sort are made, a meeting is convened consisting of the dean, the accusing faculty member, and the department chair for said member. This particular (mis)step in the career process was chosen because formal complaints about collegiality can serve an institutional gatekeeping function for junior professors and are especially problematic for underrepresented faculty, like the assistant professor discussed next.

The Stock Story

Setting. The Dean of Humanities, a department chair, and a tenured professor are in a university conference room to discuss Soldada (Sol) Adelante, a Chicana assistant professor who has just submitted her annual review portfolio to her department, but who is also embroiled in defamatory accusations from a tenured colleague within her department. The Dean of Humanities, Victoria (Vicky) Lignum, is a white woman. Harold (Harry) Euday is a white man, chair of the English department, tenured, and newly appointed to the position of department chair. The accusing professor, Stanley (Stan) Nimmer, is a tenured white man who has been at the university for over a decade. At the time of this meeting, Sol has completed her first year and a half of employment at this university. The reason for this meeting is an attempt to address and decide on the next course of action toward mediating and/or resolving the accusations made against Sol by Stanley Nimmer. Because Sol has recently submitted her annual review portfolio, she is in a particularly precarious position regarding these accusations and her ability to pass review (Del Hierro 2019; Hesford et. al 2018).

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LIGNUM: Thank you all for finding the time to meet today. I acknowledge this is the first day of spring semester, so I know it's an incredibly busy time for all. I also know this is not an ideal circumstance under which to meet, so I am hoping we have come to this table with the intent to eventually resolve all raised issues and to move forward in ways that permit us to work together at this university as colleagues.
[general nods around the table]

LIGNUM *[pausing momentarily to look at her notes]*: Now, Stan, I see that you have concerns about the collegiality of a junior member of your department, Soldada Adelante, and I'd like to begin there. Can you describe your concerns to me?

NIMMER *[clearing his throat]*: Yes, well, as I explained to you a bit over email, Vicky, and as I've made known to my chair, Harry, over the course of the ←242 | 243→past few semesters, Soldada has proven herself a continual hindrance to my ability to fully and meaningfully participate in our department—particularly in our graduate program. She constantly and consistently disparages my name to graduate students and has effectively turned them against me to the point they don't enroll in my graduate seminars and don't ask me to serve on their exam and dissertation committees.

LIGNUM: Okay, Stan, so what is the resolution or outcome you are seeking in raising these concerns about Soldada?

NIMMER: I just want to be able to do my job. I want her disparagement to stop, so I can just do my job. I am hoping this meeting will be the beginning of the end of my mistreatment at her hands.

LIGNUM: Harry, to be clear, and for the record, Stan has raised these concerns about Soldada with you before? Has the other party, Soldada, spoken with you about these issues in any capacity?

EUDAY *[hesitant]*: Well … yes. You see, today marks the conclusion of my first semester as department chair, so I've been in this role for less time than this has been an issue, which Stan says began during Soldada's first semester, a year and a half ago. So, my awareness of these issues really only spans the time I've been in department leadership. However, yes, since my appointment to chair, Stan has made clear to me his concerns about Soldada.

[Nimmer, seemingly wanting to add something, but Lignum raising her hand in a gesture to wait]

LIGNUM: And Harry, if you will, what has Stan reported to you as his concerns with Soldada?

EUDAY: Hmm … well, beginning with his earliest concerns, he has said that Soldada conducts herself within the department in a way that is un-collegial and unsupportive to him as her colleague.

LIGNUM *[looking from Euday to Nimmer and back again]*: Meaning what? Provide illustration please.

NIMMER *[tentatively, politely]*: If I may, Vicky?

[Lignum nods]

NIMMER: My first concern became overwhelmingly apparent when the decision was made to place Soldada on my departmental professional development (PD) committee. You see, I've repeatedly asked the leadership in our department to only appoint committee members who have some semblance of competence in faculty training and development—yet time and time again—and honestly this is because our department is so limited in adequately trained colleagues—I am made to work with committee members who don't know the first thing about training teachers and could care less about the work.

[Euday shifts uncomfortably in his seat, but says nothing]

LIGNUM: Let's pause for a minute, just to be sure I'm getting all of this. What I heard you say is that you became concerned about Soldada's ←243 | 244→collegiality and support of you because she was appointed to your professional development committee without the required expertise? Is this what you meant to say?

NIMMER *[haltingly]*: Oh—well, no, I wasn't making a connection between collegiality and Soldada's placement on my committee—I was just making a point that we don't have enough faculty in our department with expertise in teacher training and faculty development to justifiably do this work—there's such an emphasis on rhetorical theory and critical theory that I'm left with practically no colleagues to conduct the important work of professional development for writing teachers …

LIGNUM *[interrupting]*: But again, how does this connect to your point about this being the first moment you realized concerns about Soldada?

NIMMER: It was within these first close-quarters interactions that I realized she was not only minimally equipped to do the work of teacher training, but that she had a disdain for it.

LIGNUM: A disdain? How so?

EUDAY *[piping up]*: Yes, how so, Stan? I just reviewed her portfolio for annual review, and her materials state that in the one year she served on the PD committee, Soldada organized two professional development opportunities for the department, one on making our documents accessible in coordination with the Office of Disability, and another about organizing student portfolio work for assessment …

NIMMER: Yes, well, I mean, Soldada did contribute in those ways, and I was sure to acknowledge her in department meetings for this work, however speaking of portfolios, when the PD committee first broached the idea that a workshop on portfolio assessment was necessary, it was immediately apparent to me that Soldada was unsure of what portfolios are in an pedagogical context, and this was confirmed for me when she arranged to meet with me separately about this very topic! She had to seek me out separately and take up time I do not have to discuss portfolios and organizing this workshop, and I'm sorry, but it's my opinion that colleagues should be hired with these skill sets in place. I don't think that's asking too much.

LIGNUM: But again, Stan, what does this have to do with Soldada's lack of collegiality or her disdain, as you've reported, for professional development? It sounds to me that, Soldada, as a new and junior colleague, sought you out for guidance and support in this task …

NIMMER: I might be misremembering the timing of when the disdain came into play, which was closer to the end of that first semester.

[Nimmer pauses and Lignum nods for him to go on]

NIMMER: Within Soldada's first semester, we were also in the process of hiring a new colleague, and our final meeting for the semester culminated in Soldada fully displaying her disdain for a potential future colleague, ←244 | 245→and even relishing the idea that our grad students would treat this new colleague unfairly when hired.

LIGNUM: Well that's alarming, and new information. Harry, would you mind filling in some blanks from your memory and perspective of this meeting?

EUDAY *[looking at once confused and as if mining his memory]*: I do remember this discussion, but I remember the concerns raised by Soldada, and a couple other faculty actually, had to do with the fact that a couple of our candidates' research had demonstrated a lack of attention to or accounting for race and gender in ways that could become problematic for them in our department—particularly with our graduate students who are generally pretty critical scholars.

NIMMER: Yes! And whether or not other faculty raised these concerns, it was Soldada, and the way she delivered this message of "concern" *[using air quotes]* from our grad students that caused my initial alarm about her as a colleague—she did it with such relish, and such disdain for the job candidates, that I made it very clear in that meeting that if anyone had spoken of me or my candidacy in such a way when hiring decisions were being made about me, well, I never would have come here under such un-collegial conditions. And from that moment on, Soldada's lack of collegiality has only increased and continued.

LIGNUM: Go on.

NIMMER: The following spring semester, Soldada took it upon herself to outwardly and vocally denounce me for an assessment decision I made in *my* class about one of *my* doctoral students during fall semester.

LIGNUM: What was the decision?

NIMMER: I assigned the student an F.

LIGNUM *[again looking from Nimmer to Euday and back again]*: And is it common in your graduate program to assign a failing grade to a doctoral student?

EUDAY: No.

NIMMER: No, unless it’s warranted. And it was. By the conclusion of the semester, after repeated meetings with this student, this student was still never able to demonstrate an expertise in my course content area, so I assigned the grade this student earned. And of course, this student appealed, but was unsuccessful. My reasoning and assessment were upheld by our former chair and your office *[gesturing toward Lignum]* when Dee Riley was dean.

LIGNUM: While we’re not here today to discuss this student and their grade, I do need to know how and why you are linking Soldada’s involvement in this grade dispute to your other claims about her?

NIMMER: Like I said, Soldada made the conscious choice to take this student’s side in the appeal process, and to be insultingly vocal about it. She also made the conscious choice not to support or speak to me about any aspect of it, when at the end of the day *I* am her colleague, not this ←245 | 246→student. Soldada chose the path of un-collegiality and has stayed on it, steadfast, from that moment on.

LIGNUM: Okay, so to be clear, your claim is that Soldada’s support of this student is a demonstration of her lack of collegiality toward you?

NIMMER: Yes. But it’s more than that. Within that same semester, I organized for a top anti-racist assessment expert to be brought to campus for our department’s annual Spring Orators Symposium (SOS). And Soldada took this very well-attended and public occasion as her opportunity to participate in call-out-culture.

LIGNUM: “Call-out-culture”?

NIMMER: Yes, you know—where people call out others publicly to embarrass them.

LIGNUM: Okay, how did Soldada “participate in call-out-culture”?

NIMMER: I’ll never forget it—during the Q&A, she had the nerve to ask this prominent scholar, a leading authority on anti-racist assessment, if she has plans to extend this research on racism and grading practices beyond undergraduate assessment, for instance to graduate-level assessment?

[Lignum stares expectantly at Nimmer]

NIMMER *[filling in the blank]*: She called me out in front of that whole room! It was uncalled for and humiliating.

LIGNUM *[observing Nimmer for a moment, then turning her gaze toward Euday]*: Do you recall this occurrence?

EUDAY: I do. However, I didn't take Soldada's question to be about calling out Stan—in fact, Soldada's research asks questions concerning graduate level assessment, pretty much the same question she asked our speaker, so I just assumed the question was related to her own inquiry …

NIMMER *[irritatedly interrupting]*: Come on, Harry! Her question was a pointed provocation and nothing short of an opportunist's move to show her bias!

LIGNUM *[eyebrows raised]*: Her bias? Can you elaborate, Stan?

NIMMER *[regaining composure]*: Well, she tends to show a certain kind of *cultural preference* among her students. And it really shows in her disrespect for those in seniority or positions of authority …

LIGNUM *[interrupting]*: Give me some examples, Stan.

NIMMER *[hesitating, then ramping up]*: Look, let's not pretend we don't know that Soldada is Hispanic. The grad student with the grade dispute is African American. I'm a white guy. I'm well aware of the optics, and I'm no idiot. I recognize a set up when I see one. Soldada, in an un-collegial and opportunist way, seized upon the moment of this anti-racist assessment speaker, who, by the way, *I* invited to campus, to publicly make known her biased view of me. I'm no fool. Her question overtly implied that an assessment decision I made based on merit was instead based on some sort of racial preference I harbor. I see what she did, ←246 | 247→and the way she behaves is not the way a colleague should ever behave. I mean, she never even bothered to ask me, her actual colleague, about the grade. And honestly, is it too much to expect that my expertise and assessment of *my* students in *my* course be respected? And then *[gesturing with both arms for emphasis]*, she has the gall to escalate the issue and organize a whole gang of graduate students to turn against me! It's untenable, and I simply cannot do my work while this woman is allowed free reign like this!

LIGNUM *[her face inscrutable]*: Soldada organized "a whole gang of graduate students" against you?

[Euday motioning as if about to contribute, but then deciding otherwise and remaining silent]

NIMMER: How else did the students organize over that summer to write a letter condemning the F I assigned? They even sent it to alumni for signatures! And then, by the time Soldada's second fall semester rolled around, she somehow organized the returning and the newly admitted graduate students to completely boycott my graduate seminar, thus blocking my ability to work effectively within the graduate program. Her actions are beyond un-collegial, they're shameful.

EUDAY *[deciding to interject]*: Now, I have to add that Stan's assigned graduate seminar was an elective course, which don't always make in enrollment—however, it is true that the particular course he was scheduled to teach is usually popular with graduate students, so I will admit it was curious that the enrollment was zero.

[Nimmer making a gesture with his hands as if to say "see?"]

LIGNUM *[looking pensive for a few moments]:* I see. Well, I believe I have enough information about your concerns to open a case and begin an investigation. I'll get in touch with Soldada and will call her into a meeting as well—Harry, you'll also need to attend this meeting.

[Euday nods]

LIGNUM: In the meantime, Stan, I recommend you do your best to do the work required of you, and because this is the start of an inquiry into your claims, I recommend you keep contact and interaction with Soldada limited. Is there anything else either of you wish to add?

[Both Euday and Nimmer shake their heads "no"]

LIGNUM: Okay, then I'll be in touch.

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←247 | 248→

A COUNTERSTORY IN WHICH A CHICANA JUNIOR PROFESSOR AND HER MENTOR DISCUSS HER COLLEGIALITY

Setting. At the request of Dean Victoria Lignum, Soldada (Sol) Adelante is preparing to attend a meeting regarding accusations made against her by her senior colleague, Stanley Nimmer. Dean Lignum has informed Sol that she is permitted to bring an advocate/witness with her to this meeting, so, as an act of coalitional solidarity, possibility, and *comadrismo*, Sol has asked her mentor, Professor Mar Illumine, a Black woman, who is tenured and an endowed chair of a separate department (Licona and Chávez 2015; Ribero and Arellano 2019). Sol and Mar Illumine have decided to get coffee and discuss key points to raise during this impending meeting.

SOL *[hugging Illumine]*: Hi! Thank you so much for doing this on such short notice —I know you leave for that keynote in Amsterdam tomorrow, so coming in to help me deal with this nonsense—I just can't thank you enough.

ILLUMINE: Girl, don't think about it. Of course I'd do this, I'm just so sorry you're going through it—and I wish I could say these sort of things aren't as common as they are—people coming for us like this …

SOL: Ugh. I know. In some ways I feel like I dealt with a version of this in graduate school with some peers, then again at my first job with one of our admins, but this is just scary because of its timing—I'm guessing it's no coincidence that Stan timed these accusations to hit right as I've submitted my materials for annual review.

ILLUMINE: Well, first off, I'm not positive how your department handles reviews, but from what you described to me over the phone, it sounds like Stan's claims against you really just amount to issues he has with your collegiality, which is NOT something your department can base an annual review on—I don't know if that makes you feel better or not, but know that much.

SOL: Yeah, that helps a bit—but I'm still nervous about the process—and about being assessed in general. I've told you about the first annual review I went through as a grad student, right?

ILLUMINE: Yeah, where your chair at the time told you to "take the MA and go"?

SOL: That's the one. So, you can see why reviews and other sorts of assessment are a bit triggering for me every time I have to go through them …

ILLUMINE: Yes. Understood, completely. And you know that first chair was wrong about you, right? I mean, it should go without being said …

SOL: Haha, well yes—and no. I feel like there's always something challenging my legitimacy in this space. You know, as I put together my ←248 | 249→portfolio for this year's review, I had another colleague's to look at as a guide and example. And as I read his portfolio, and filled in the blanks to build mine, I couldn't help but think: "What, really, is the difference between me and him?" I mean, when he was at my stage a couple years ago, our work and level of contribution/participation in the department is comparable. So, what's the difference here?

ILLUMINE: Are you talking about your colleague Paul LeSant?

SOL: You know it.

ILLUMINE: Psh! Girl, you *know* the difference. That should go without saying—

SOL: Yes, I mean, I know the racial and gendered differences, white man and a Chicana, but the most *felt* difference for me right now, in this moment, with these accusations, is that Paul gets to go through his review processes, nerve-wracking as they can be, without the additional burden of accusations from a senior colleague being hurled his way. And that sucks. It makes me so sad.

ILLUMINE: Yes, I totally get you. I can't think of how it might feel right now to know that the very person actively pursuing a case against you, is *also* allowed to have a voice and vote on decisions made about your career—which is why we need to talk about a game plan. Let's map out some key points that need to be made in this meeting with Dean Lignum.

SOL: Okay.

ILLUMINE: First off, besides talking to me and a few other mentors about the trouble you've had with Stan from the start, have you ever reported his behavior to any administrative offices?

SOL: Well, no. I actually didn't think to do that because (1) I optimistically hoped my issues with him would just sorta fade or dissipate over time through lack of contact and interaction with him. But (2) I've personally witnessed people in my department either make dismissive excuses for his behavior, or just not address it in the moment, so I really didn't know what sort of recourse I had in the first place.

ILLUMINE: Fair enough. Well, now that he’s made the move to open up a case on you, let’s strategize the ways you can not only defend yourself against these accusations, but finally report on what I know you’ve been dealing with from him for going on two years now—hold up, let me get a pen and paper to take notes.

[Illumine rifles around in her bag while Sol sighs, deeply]

ILLUMINE: Okay, let’s start from the start—I know he started messing with you right away …

SOL: Yes. In my first semester, I was appointed to his PD committee, and being that I was coming off of directing my former university’s summer bridge program, I was excited about the opportunity to dive into this university’s writing program and to start learning how writing curriculum, assessment, and teacher training work here.

ILLUMINE: Right, and this is when Stan asked you that super basic question about portfolios …

SOL: Yes, exactly. One day, early on in the semester, we were in a committee meeting and Stan starts talking about a portfolio workshop he’d like the committee to organize for professional development, and before going on, he pointedly looked at me and asked “Soldada, do you know *what* a portfolio *is*?”

[Illumine shakes her head]

SOL: And of course I was stunned and embarrassed by the question, because Stan caught me off-guard.

ILLUMINE: Right! I mean, it’s like he never read your CV or something, which is crazy because they’d just hired you!

SOL: Exactly! How did he not, at minimum, read my CV and see that not only have I already worked as a writing program administrator, but that I trained in a grad program and with professors who pretty much wrote the book on portfolios and assessment?!

ILLUMINE: Girl.

SOL: I know.

[Illumine and Sol briefly pause to breathe a bit and sip some coffee]

SOL: I told you about that early search of mine for a therapist, right?

ILLUMINE: You know yoga is my therapy, but yeah, you told me a bit …

SOL: Yeah—and how hard it is to find a WOC therapist in this town, especially as a new person who doesn't have the benefit of word of mouth just yet …

ILLUMINE: And I know that's hard, because as it is, there are so few WOC as therapists, and then trying to ask our referrals office for something this specific—they don't know what to do!

SOL: I know! I called the university referrals office right after that PD committee meeting, right after that shitty question of Stan's, and I told the referrals person, "Please only give me names of WOC therapists"—I was not in the mood to spend the first six visits, plus the money that costs, explaining to a white therapist the problems I have with institutional white supremacy and "colorblind" racism. I need to get down to business, not teach a therapist the things I teach students all day!

ILLUMINE: That's right.

SOL: So after much searching with this good-natured and well-meaning referrals person, I was able to get in with one of the three available WOC therapists in the area, and during my first appointment with her I just sort of vomited this PD meeting and question from Stan all over her. And you know what she suggested I do?

ILLUMINE: What?

SOL: She said I should make an appointment with him right away to prove to him how much I *do* know about assessment and portfolios …

←250 | 251→

ILLUMINE: So that's what you did—and that's what we do—when folk challenge us and our knowledges, we sort of default into this reactive behavior that motivates us to "show them."

SOL: Yeah—exactly—it's so bootstraps, I hate it, yet I also felt forced—cornered into it—my expertise was being called into question, so yeah, I made that appointment with Stan to go show off, to practically tap dance how *much* I know about portfolios—I even ended up taking on the lead and labor of organizing that professional development session on portfolios, because of how much I wanted to prove I was capable, knowledgeable, and worthy—and for what? What difference did it make with Stan?

ILLUMINE: None. He'd made up his mind about you, long before you stepped foot on campus. You are a brown woman, you study rhetoric—as well as writing—but just that combination of brown plus rhetoric was enough for him to write you off from the start.

SOL: Wait, what? Really? Why?

ILLUMINE: Look, I've been at this university for a long time—and because my work has some overlap with the work y'all do in your department, I've had ample opportunity to see how things function in that space. The one thing that has been made crystal clear, on multiple occasions, about Stan—and folk like him—is that he's got a very particular chip on his shoulder when it comes to rhetoric …

SOL: But that's not all that I do! I'm a writing studies scholar as much as I'm a scholar of rhetoric—for me, the two are inextricable …

ILLUMINE: But you're brown. And for folk like Stan—and let me tell you, he's not the only one of his kind—brown plus rhetoric is automatically, wholly, and disciplinarily apart and subpar to the work he does. It's unfortunately a disciplinary line in the sand I've seen drawn too often and in many varying ways in English departments …

SOL: But that's so unfair! He's assuming things about me, before even giving me a chance …

ILLUMINE: That's how they do …

[Sol is silent for a moment in quiet contemplation]

SOL: So, with Stan, I never stood a chance?

ILLUMINE *[shaking her head]*: Probably not.

SOL *[laughing]*: If this were a lawsuit, and if it were legal to subpoena my records from my therapist, they'd see that most if not all of my time with her was spent talking about the consistent harassment and questioning of my training and abilities from Stan.

ILLUMINE: And that's a damn shame!

SOL: I know.

ILLUMINE: So, beyond his initial questioning of your abilities, what other major points need to be noted?

SOL: Well, as mentioned, I pulled myself up by those bootstraps and turned out a kickass portfolio professional development workshop that even earned me some praise from Stan in a faculty meeting!

ILLUMINE *[eyebrows raised]*: Really?

SOL: Yes, but right when I thought things with him were cool, and speaking of faculty meetings, our final meeting for the semester culminated in me getting yelled at by Stan.

ILLUMINE: Oh right, his “outburst”—as it was characterized by some of your colleagues —

SOL: Yes, ONE of his outbursts, because when these colleagues characterized it as such, I surely noted the plural nature of this characterization, and soon found out this “outburst” was only one of many that Stan did in other settings and at other times—and one of two that I’ve experienced in the time I’ve been employed here.

ILLUMINE: More white men doing violent things and having it minimized and dismissed …

SOL: Yes, exactly! In fact, when I brought up this “outburst” to another white male colleague, who until this point I had thought was an ally, he said, “Oh yeah, that was unfortunate. Stan’s really not been himself lately—maybe he’s tired.” *[“Wow” Illumine silently mouthed, looking unsurprised]*

ILLUMINE: And remind me why he yelled in this faculty meeting in the first place?

SOL: It was over a hiring decision. There were a couple candidates in the finalist pool who some of our grad students had concerns about. Two of the white candidates made moves in their research presentations to show they were not accounting for race in ways that were problematic considering they were studying people of color. So, the grad students asked me to broach the issue in our hiring meeting.

ILLUMINE: Right, because you’re all they’ve got in that department when it comes to faculty of color!

SOL: Yes! The students repeatedly tell me they feel comfortable coming to me about things like this, but when I’m the sole person of color in faculty meetings voicing these concerns, *I* look like the problem!

ILLUMINE: Yup, instead of them seeing the real problem is the stark whiteness of the department!

SOL: See?!

ILLUMINE: Girl, I already know. What exactly did you say that set him off?

SOL: I was about to teach my own grad seminar the following semester, and the students in our program have a national reputation for being some of the most rigorous and critical scholars in our field, so out of honest concern for my own future grad seminar, but also considering my and the grad students' concerns with these candidates, I said that our students are tough, and that they'll likely chew up and spit out faculty who do not come to the table prepared to critically engage the ←252 | 253→issues our students apply to our program for and expect from faculty. And further, I asked who would help these new colleagues, should we hire them, to prepare for this critical engagement? Who would mentor them toward preparedness for our grad students?

ILLUMINE: And that set him off?

SOL: He was furious. I've never seen anything like it. He accused me right then and there of saying all that I said "with relish" and he said the way I spoke about these candidates was unethical, disdainful, and that if anyone had ever talked about him that way, he never would have come here.

ILLUMINE: Yet here he is.

SOL: Yes, and here I am, two years later, answering for my crimes.

ILLUMINE: So it wasn't until the following semester that Rhea Zilyent approached you about the failing grade he gave her?

SOL: Yes, well, actually, I'd sorta heard whispers here and there about the F, because students and faculty were in such shock about it—it just doesn't happen at the doctoral level. So, I reached out to Rhea about it myself—I mean, you know that part of my story as well—that I too received a failing grade in grad school

ILLUMINE: You felt too deeply Rhea's cut.

SOL: Too deeply. There were too many similarities. Rhea was in her first year, Rhea came from another field, Rhea was a first-gen WOC—it was all too recognizable—how could I NOT see the humanity in Rhea and that she was suffering. How could I not be there for her? These failing grades tell students they don’t belong, that a mistake has been made about their admission, and I’ll be damned if any professor argues otherwise.

ILLUMINE: And you said this grade wasn’t based on something like non-attendance or not turning in work?

SOL: Right. No, Rhea went to class. Rhea turned in work. It’s just that Stan decided she did not demonstrate “expertise” in a subject she was learning in her first semester, so he felt justified in assessing Rhea accordingly. But what folk like Stan fail to note, or care about, I suppose, is what assessment like this *feels* like.

ILLUMINE: Right. I mean, put yourself in this student’s shoes.

SOL: Exactly. And that’s where my support of Rhea comes from. I *have* been in those shoes. And more important than that, every single one of us has been a grad student, and on varying levels have felt the precarity and vulnerability of this positionality within coursework and in relation to those who assess us: the professors.

ILLUMINE: But for some, the further they advance in their careers away from being grad students, the seemingly less compassionate they are to the experience.

SOL: Right. Or maybe the compassion was never there at all.

←253 | 254→

[Illumine nods curtly. Right.]

SOL: Whatever the reason, my involvement in supporting Rhea through this traumatic experience of being assessed like this had and still has nothing to do with Stan. At the end of the day, *I know* there is no bearing I can have on his decision to assign this F in the first place, and I definitely knew, as a newly hired junior faculty member, that there was little to nothing I could do to persuade him to change the grade. What I did know, though, is that Rhea is a person who was suffering. And the least I could do, especially because of how much I identified with this exact circumstance, is be there for her. Tell her what I needed to hear all those years ago and be the mentor to her that I didn’t have at the time.

[Sol and Illumine sit quietly again, sipping more coffee]

ILLUMINE: So again, what’s his actual claim against you? What’s he saying you’ve done?

SOL *[reading from the email on her phone]*: The email from Dean Lignum says he's accused me of "being un-collegial, participating in call-out-culture, and making it impossible for him to work with graduate students."

ILLUMINE: Wow—and did he ever hear the saying, "When you point one finger there are three pointing back at you"?

[Sol chuckles]

ILLUMINE: These accusations are preposterous and truly show his lack of accountability for his own actions.

SOL: Don't they? Yet I suspect he's citing a series of events after the F, involving the grad students, as having something to do with me.

ILLUMINE: Such as? Oh, the letter and his course not making?

SOL: Yep. And the funny thing about both of those consequences, is that I found out about them *after* they were already in motion. But I'm sure anything I say to that effect won't change what he's decided about me. He's cast me as the antagonist in his story, and that's that.

ILLUMINE: Oh! I just remembered! *[starts typing away at her phone]*

SOL: What?

[Illumine holds up one finger and continues typing and scrolling]

ILLUMINE *[exclaiming]*: Ah! I found it!

SOL: Found what?

ILLUMINE: The year before you were hired, I attended a symposium organized by the grad students in your department. I can't believe I didn't think of this until now—anyway, this event featured a handful of scholars from around the country, and one of the speakers really rubbed Stan the wrong way. While I don't remember the details of the dispute, I DO remember when a few of your program's grad students defended this speaker against Stan's perceived unfair critique. And Stan WENT. OFF.

SOL: Oh my gosh, really? Another "outburst"?

←254 | 255→

ILLUMINE: Girl, yes. He screamed and shouted at these students in front of eve.ry.one. And here's the kicker—all of this "outburst" of his was captured on the transcription service for hearing impaired audience members.

SOL: And don't tell me you have the transcript right there in your email?

ILLUMINE: Yes. I. Do.

SOL: And all of this ire was directed at grad students a whole YEAR before I was hired—

ILLUMINE: Girl, we are *ready* for this meeting. Finish that coffee and let's go. We've got some stories to share with Dean Lignum.

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←257 | 258→

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[1] The stock story versus counterstory within this essay constitutes part II of a three-part *papelitos guardados* dialogue series. Part I is the stock story versus counterstory in Martinez’s 2014 *Composition Studies* essay “A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Dialogues Concerning Alejandra’s ‘Fit’ in the Academy.”

Afterword: Failure and Letting Go

ASAO B. INOUE

As I write this afterword, I'm sitting in an empty room, formerly my home office in Gig Harbor, Washington, just days away from leaving the state to head to a new place, Tempe, Arizona, and Arizona State University, the next chapter in my career. I've had a year to transition, and I've wondered often: Am I failing to stay, or succeeding in leaving? Am I failing to hold on, or succeeding in letting go of a job that doesn't quite fit in a place that fits too well? I'm a bit tired but energized by this writing task in front of me, after a few days of reading through the collection between meetings, packing boxes, and selling furniture and items my family and I don't want to take with us—days of letting things go.

The other day, I was at our Masters of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies hooding ceremony for graduates at University of Washington Tacoma. I hooded two students, whose theses I chaired, and I let them go. I feel proud of both students. One is a Black female student from a middle-class family who moved around a lot while growing up because her dad was in the military. The other is a middle-class white female student originally from Nebraska. Both students have let things go in their studies, their families, their respective theses, in their very different lives, in order to finish, to graduate, to be counted as successful. And in each case, we talked about the letting go of things, sometimes framed as compromises in a chapter or missing discussions, sometimes as a sacrifice of precious time or a partner's sacrifice of a weekend potentially spent together instead of apart. Sacrifices. Compromises. Separation. Differences. Gaps. Letting go.

←259 | 260→

Like all my past graduate students, these students are not like me in a number of ways, and our differences come with the potential for other kinds of failure: failure to connect, failure to communicate, failure to get along, failure to hear what I'm offering, or my failure to understand and hear them on their terms. These days I am thoroughly middle-class but came from a working poor family with a disposition toward things and others I just cannot let go of so easily. I was raised in North Las Vegas in an all-Black neighborhood, in government subsidized housing. Moving up meant moving to a broken-down mobile home in a trailer park in a working-class part of town. The trailer park and roach-filled apartment still feel around the corner, one failure away. Neither student comes from such places, neither have such dispositions. The differences don't stop with where we grew up. Because I'm Asian American of Japanese descent on my father's side, and my mom is a mixture of British and Scottish and likely Greek or Italian, it's rare that my students share my blend of racial and cultural histories.

There was an old family story about being part Cherokee because of a relative in Oklahoma and Arkansas several generations back on my mom's side. My dad's side is easier. He is from Hawai'i. His grandparents on both sides are from Japan. In the last few years, my brother and my aunt on my mom's side had DNA tests done. Come to find out, if the tests are accurate, there's no indigenous blood in us, no Cherokee. A failure in our family stories that told us who we allegedly were, a failure to know who we are now? But then, what's so accurate about those DNA tests? Saliva in a test tube sent off to an unknown lab to be analyzed by unknown machines in unknown processes? How are the results validated? All of it feels like hokum and smoke.

While my brother’s results seemed to validate my aunt’s and my father’s known genetic heritage, I don’t know if they help me in my own embodied life, in understanding who I am, in dealing with those around me. What I do know is that I am a professor of color, a cisgender male. Because of my own linguistic dispositions and the markers of masculinity that most people hear in my words and see on my body, I have some privilege in many situations in classrooms and on campus, but that privileging has always been uneven. It’s not something I can count on in any given situation, and I’m glad for that. The failure to be like most others around me in academic and other settings gives me uneasiness and a critical sense of things. It’s like always looking from the outside in at something. I’m never of a place, just passing through. While race is not always visible, I still do the race count in meetings and rooms. How many bodies of color are there in the room? Am I the only brown guy here? The counting helps me gauge my anxiety, helps me be mindful, helps me understand where the boundaries of failure are for me. I don’t control the numbers, so I let go constantly, or am I holding on to something? Regardless, the practice of counting is hard to let go, especially when it has helped me get by for so long.

←260 | 261→

I still fear tumbling back into poverty, even after all the career success. Economic failure always feels around the corner. My twin brother has this same fear. We’ve talked about it. It’s why we obsess so much over our careers, why we have packed so much work into the years we have behind us. Is this expectation of failure all bad? It’s gotten me here in this position, a tenured full professor and associate dean. I’m Chair of my field’s national organization. I’ve published several award-winning books, as well as numerous articles. I’ve won teaching awards. I’m asked to give workshops and lectures at different schools a lot—I have to turn people down. I’ve been all over the world doing my work. It would seem that I’m just full of successes, that I’m empty of failures. It would seem. And yet, I have had to let many things go. I have failed. I worry about my relationships with my sons. Was I there enough? The answer is clear: No. I was always working or travelling, always absent, always writing nearby, too busy to play or talk. Now, it all feels like unfair sacrifices to do anti-racist work that led to personal separation from my sons—and to career success. Can I have one without the other? I try to let go of this worry in order to move on.

But I also fail a lot professionally, not just because of my work ethic. The first time I submitted a manuscript to *College Composition and Communication*, I received a harsh review with my rejection. The editor at the time said nothing. Just attached the letter with a simple note that stated: rejected. Thanks for submitting. The reviewer said that my manuscript "read like a graduate student's seminar paper." It was meant to be an honest assessment of the draft, but it came off to me, a first-time submitter, first-generation graduate, pre-tenured scholar of color, like a mean, callous thing to say, with an additional back-handed insult to a group I'd recently left. Why would a graduate student's seminar paper make for a bad draft? It would seem the opposite should be true. Seminar papers are good grounds for new scholarship—isn't that how we prepare to write into the field?

Failures are everywhere here. My failure to write appropriately to the reviewers of the journal. The reviewers' failure to be compassionate and constructive in their comments. The editor's failure to coach their reviewers to offer more helpful feedback, and perhaps even keep the draft from moving forward before its time. The long-lasting failure in this experience was that it has kept me from submitting manuscripts to that very journal ever since. I've been asked to write for that journal, even co-edit a special issue of its sister journal, *College English*. I've been on the journal's editorial board. Imagine that, I'm a reviewer and past board member of a journal that I couldn't get published in, that I've not submitted a manuscript to in over a decade and a half. To this day, I have not published in the journal that is central to the very organization I lead as its Chair. Why? I'm afraid of failing. I fail at giving up that past failure. Failure is hard to let go.

I'll close this afterword with one more failure, a failure in my reading of this collection's chapters. I learned a lot from these authors and found many ideas and ←261 | 262→questions around failure from this collection. I’m honored and grateful to have the opportunity to offer readers a few words in closing. Part of what I understand as my obligation in this afterword, though, is to reveal some failures, at least from my own limited vantage point. I should say that pointing out failure is not blaming others or devaluing them or their work. It is, as I see it, a compassionate act of attending deeply to others.

The most obvious failure to me of this collection was likely inevitable, a product of our discipline and schools. The collection is very white and female in who is represented in its pages. Of the 27 authors in this collection, 19 are white females, five are white males, two are Latina, one a Black female, and one an Austrian woman. I realize that there are many dimensions of our subject positions and identities that we might bring forward in our research and scholarship, and the authors of this collection consistently do this. A few identify themselves as faculty of color and as a non-native speaker (Martinez; Barrón and Gruber), writing program administrators dealing with student trauma (Stenberg and Waite), queer teacher-scholars (Johnson and Sheehan), a white graduate student attempting critical pedagogy (Lehn), two-year college teachers terminated by their institution (Giordano and Phillips), a white feminist writing program administrator acknowledging her own and the field’s failed intersectionality (LaFrance), a white woman and woman of color dealing with infertility (Novotny and Givhan), and a disabled teacher-scholar and graduate student (Hubrig). I appreciate the ways these authors identify themselves. But I still hear failures in my reading. Is failure easier to admit if you’re white and female, or maybe too risky if you’re an academic of color, or if you’re trans, or if you are a man? This makes me wonder, along with a number of the chapters’ authors in the volume: What is the relationship between failure and race, gender, and class?

Of the 19 chapters and interchapters in this book, less than half situate their authors’ racialized subject positions in their discussions of failure, “situate” here meaning they do more than merely identify their racialized and gendered positioning, a good first step. Most of the chapters make no mention of their authors’ racialized subject positions and how each embodied writer-teacher-researcher inhabits their research. While they do offer other dimensions of their identities, race is often conspicuously unnamed. Race affects all of us in every dimension of our lives, especially failure. Since I didn’t know many of the authors already, I did some sleuthing online to find out who they are. I acknowledge that I fail to know reliably or accurately who most of these authors are. Faculty web pages, pictures, and bios do not always tell the tale of one’s racialized subject position. More failing.

Am I suggesting that all writers need to disclose their own racialized subject positions? I’m not sure. I am suggesting that there is an interesting paradox in the ←262 | 263→question of how much we need to know about an author in order to read them. How much can someone say about something like failure without acknowledging in some important ways that they speak from a particular place and history, within an already racialized and gendered body in time and space? Failure resides in how we, individually and as a discipline, answer this question. So, I leave you, dear reader, with this paradox, which may or may not be a failure. Regardless, at times, we must let go.

←263 | 264→

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←267 | 268→

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←268 | 269→

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←269 | 270→

Index

#metoo 121, 123

A Nation At Risk 84

A Nation Still At Risk 84

Ableism, see Infertility

Abrams, Stacey 21

Adorno, Theodor 29, 31

Ahmed, Sara 2, 87, 129, 130–31, 133, 183

 and sweaty concepts 2

Alcoff, Linda 149–50

Alexander, Jonathan, and Jacqueline Rhodes 141–42

American Society for Reproductive Medicine 195

Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit 232–33

Amossy, Ruth 15–16

Ancient Greeks 15
antapologia, see Crisis response
Anzaldúa, Gloria 29–30, 93
apologia, see Crisis response
Aristotle 14
Arola, Kristin 191–92
Aronowitz, Stanley, and Henry Giroux 87
Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey xi
Autism speaks 223

Barbarin, Imani 225
Barnes, Elizabeth 225, 228
Barrón, Nancy 92
Barry, Lynda 205
Barthes, Roland 25
Bawarshi, Anis 73–74, 90–91
Beach, Amanda, Richard Thein, and Daryl Parks 141–42, 145
Beckett, Samuel xiv
Bennett, William 84
Bérubé, Michael 32
Bessi, Alessandro, and Emilio Ferrara 66, 68
Bialostok, Steven, and Robert Whitman 84, 87
Biesta, Gert 87
Bilingualism 85–86, 91–92, 93–94
Bolish, Abraham 101–2
Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo 149
Borges, Jorge Luis 33–34

Braddock, Richard 40–41
Brock, Michelle D. 119
Brooke, Collin, and Allison Carr 132, 157
Bullet Journal (BUJO) 204–21
  and habit tracker 211–13

  and SRR (Summarize, Respond, Reflect) 213
Burns, Philip J. 79–80
Butler, Judith 32

Caputo, John D. 35
Carr, Allison 40, 132, 177–78, 184–87
Carroll, Ryan 204–5
Cassese, Erin 118, 120
Catt, Carrie Chapman 177, 179–82, 183, 184–85
Ceballo, Rosario, Erin Graham, and Jamie Hart 194
Chow, Andrew R. 118
Clarity
  and commonplaces 29
  and cultural differences 30–31, 33
  and “gap gardening” 31
  and neurodiversity 32–34
  and uncertainty 33
Clichés
  and dog whistles 17–18
  and invention 15
  and persuasion 16, 18
Clinton, Hillary 177–78, 185–87
CODE 65–66, 68
Common Core 32–33
Consigny, Scott 29
Contact zones 73
Coogan, David 79
Counterstory 237–53
  and composite characters 239
Crisis response 72, 79
  *antapologia*74, 76–77, 78–79
  *apologia*74–75, 77
  and genre 72, 73–74

- *kategoria*74–75, 76–77

Critical pedagogy 141–49

Cultural rhetorics 197–98

Dalke, Anne 103
- and Clare Mullaney 99–100

Deepwater Horizon 71–79

Delgado Bernal, Dolores 91, 93
- and Octavio Villalpando 91

Delgado, Richard 237

Demos, John 122

DeVos, Betsy 117, 118, 121

DeVoss, Dànielle Nicole 48, 63–64, 66

Dewey, John 209–10

Dicker, Susan 87–88

Didion, Joan 27

Disability
- and accomodations 229
- and “inspiration porn” 225
- and institutions 223–33
- and labor 230
- and narrative 223–33
- and narrative agency 225
- and supercrip narratives 227, 228–29

Dolmage, Jay 34, 224, 229–30
- and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson 227

Dudley, Anne Dallas 184

Edkins, Jenny 73

Evans, Harold 26

Evans, Teresa 147–48

Faber, Brenton 79
Facebook 66
Failure
    and evaluation/assessment 134, 158–59
    as betrayal 119, 124
    embodiment 127
    generative 127, 211
    pedagogy 59, 130, 132
    productive 59, 157
    queer 128, 129, 132–33, 135–37
    success/failure complex 101, 107, 112–13
Fishman, Stephen, and Lucille McCarthy 144
←272 | 273→
Ford, Christine Blasey 122
Foucault, Michel 15
Freire, Paulo 141–42

Gagnon, John 197–99
"Gap gardening," see Clarity
Genre 72, 73–74
    and agency 73–74
Gilmore, Leigh 127
Ginsburg, Ruth Bader 187–88
Giroux, Henry 141–42
Gone Home
    and queer identity 135–37
González, Francisca 93
Gorski, Paul, and Cher Chen 147–48
Grabill, Jeffrey 79
Greene, Stuart, and April Lidinsky 21
Grobstein, Paul 100

Gruber, Sybille 93
Guerra, Juan 88, 89–91, 93–94

Hairston, Maxine 144
Halberstam, J. Jack 107–8, 128–30, 228
Happiness
  Pedagogical mandate 127–28, 130–32, 137
Haraway, Donna 28
Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten 101–2
Hart-Davidson, William 66
Harvat, Zachery 136
Hayward, Tony 71, 74, 76–78
Heitzeg, Nancy A. 101
Hierro, Marcos J. Del 237–38
hooks, bell 144
Horner, Bruce 29

Infertility
  and ableist assumptions 192–93
  and intersectionality 193
  and self-disclosure 193–94
  and women of color 193–97
  as embodied rhetoric 192
Inoue, Asao 55, 56, 60, 104, 147
Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program 101
Irvin, Sherri 28–29
Irwin, Kathryn 105–6, 109

Jamison, Leslie 12–14
Jenson, Gary 123
*Journal of Educational Leadership*118

Kantor, Jodi 177–78
Karpowitz, Daniel 103
kategoria, see Crisis response
Kavanaugh, Brett 120, 122
Kells, Michelle Hall 93–94
Kerschbaum, Stephanie 226

Lahey, Jessica 99–100
Lamott, Anne 158–59
Latina Feminist Group 238
Lewiecki-Wilson, Cynthia 34
Lu, Min-Zhan 25

Maxwell, John 1–2
McClure, Marissa 192–93
McIntosh, Peggy 101
McQuaide, Stacy Bell 104
Metcalf, Stephen 13
Micciche, Laura 147, 149
Miller, Carolyn 79–80
Minh-Ha, Trinh T. 28
Mitchell, Koritha 146
Molloy, Catherine 12
Monroe, Jonathan 31
Moran, Joe 28
Muñoz, José Esteban 129

National American Woman Suffrage Association 177
Navigation 137
Nike 230
Northwestern University Sexual Misconduct Policy 121–22

Obama, Michelle 195
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria 65
Ogden, Emily 33
O’Gorman, Róisín and Margaret Werry 101
Open-access, see Two-year college
Orwell, George 16, 17, 28

Petersen, Anne Helen 147
Petey Greene Program 101
Plagiarism 39–50
  and affect 40–41, 48
  and affect on writing processes 46–47
  and identity trauma 49
  student perspectives on 42
Porter, James 142–43
Pratt, Mary Louise 73, 79–80, 144
Prendergast, Catherine 33
Price, Margaret 228–29
Prison industrial complex 107–8
Privilege
  and class 101
  and Eurocentric 91
  and racial 101, 147, 149
  and writing classrooms 60
Progress narrative 127
Puar, Jasbir 230

Queer theory 129–30, 132–34
  See also *Gone Home;* Failure, queer

Racism
  and school discipline 101
  in academia 85, 87, 89, 145

Rahimi, Regina, and Delores Liston 120
Reflection 209–10
  critical reflection 210–11
  and learning 209–10
  and mindfulness 209–10
  and pedagogy 60
Reis, Elizabeth 120
RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association 194
Rhodes, Jacqueline 132
Richards, Tara N. 121
Risk
  "At Risk" designation 87
  and language 87–89
  and minoritized/non-dominant populations 87, 90, 93–94
Ritter, Kelly 42
Rocque, Michael, and Raymond Paternoster 101
Rodgers, Kathleen 147–48
Rosetti, Annette 48
Rowling, J.K. 83–84
Ruberg, Bonnie 136–37
Ruti, Mari 130
Ryan, Halford Ross 74

Sandy Hook conspiracy theorists 65
Schept, Judah, Tyler Wall, and Avi Brisman 101
Schön, Donald 209–10
School-to-prison pipeline 101–2
Sexual harassment
  and academic freedom 118
  and misconduct, policies 121–22, 124
  on campus 118–22
  *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*118–19
  victim advocacy 124–25

  “witch hunt” 118–23
  witness/victim intimidation 118–20, 123, 24
“Silent Sam” 134
Sims, Anastasia 184
Skorczewski, Dawn 12, 18
Snyder, Sharon, and David Mitchell 229–231
Sojoyner, Damien 101–2
Stader, David L., and Jodi L. Williams-Cunningham 119
Standard Edited American English 55
Stanley, Claire 227
Star, Susan Leigh 93
Stark, Ryan J. 12, 16
Steffert, Beverley 32–33
Stein, Kevin 74
Stone, Geoffrey R. 121
←274 | 275→
Sullivan, Pat 159–60
Svurluga, Susan, and Nick Anderson 117, 18
Swales, John 73
Sword, Helen 27

Tattoos 104–7
Teller, Joseph 26
The ART of Infertility 195
Title IX 117–19, 120, 21
  reporting 120, 122, 24
Transcultural repositioning 91, 93
Trauma
  and community engagement 79–80
  and disruption 73–74
  national security trauma 73
  post-trauma discourse communities 73
  and technology 71–72

Trimbur, John 157
Trump, Donald 16, 17–18, 21, 121–23, 224, 227–28, 230
Turnitin 41–42, 50
Twitter 67
Two-year college
  austerity 156–57
  dissolution 154
  open-admission 154–59
  WPA 153

Universal Design 233

Valentine, Kathryn 42
Varenne, Hervé, and Ray McDermott 101, 107
Villanueva, Victor 237–38
Vosoughy, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Arial 69

Waite, Stacey 35, 133
Warner, John 26
Weiss, Elaine 179–80, 185–87
Wheeler, Marjorie Spruill 184–85, 187–88
White guilt 146–47
White mediocrity 146, 149
White, Sue Shelton 179–80
Williams, Joseph M., and Joseph Bizup 26
Witchcraft 118, 120
Worsham, Lynn 3
Writing centers 11–21
WPA 118, 122–23

Yancey, Kathleen Blake 213
Young, Iris 146–47

Young, Stella 205

Ziegler, Scott A. 118
Zwagerman, Sean 41, 48

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